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Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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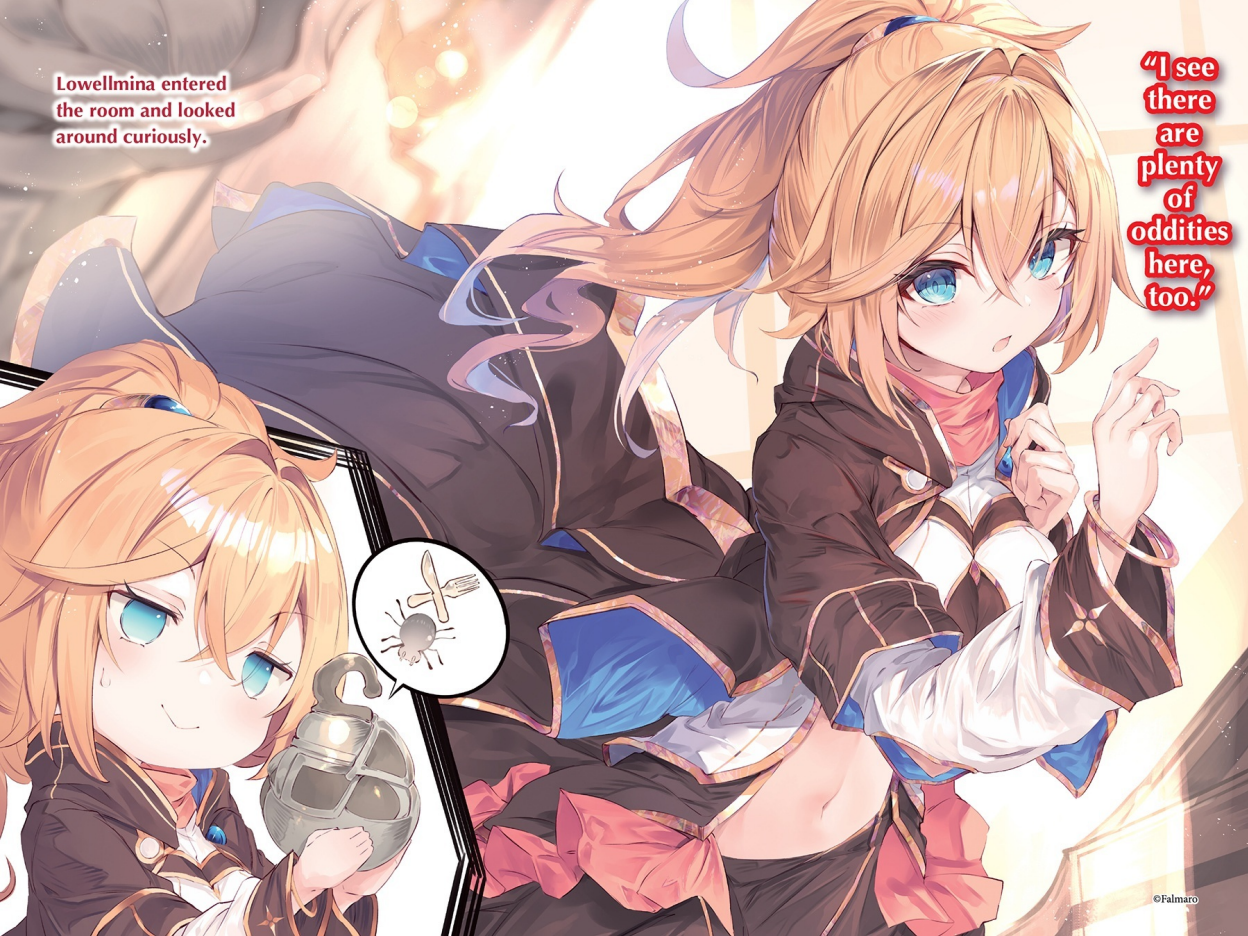
Lowellmina entered the room and looked around curiously.
"I see there are plenty of oddities here, too!"
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"Hey, Nanaki."
"Don't ask me."
"...But I haven't even said anything yet."
"I already know what you'll ask."

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Kingdom of Natra
Wein
Team Bardloche
Glen
Imperial Princess
Lowellmina
Team Manfred
Strang
Ninym
FORMER FRIENDS CLASH IN THE CHAOTIC EMPIRE...
THE WAR FOR SUCCESSION'S DRAMATIC CONCLUSION!

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The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

II

Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro

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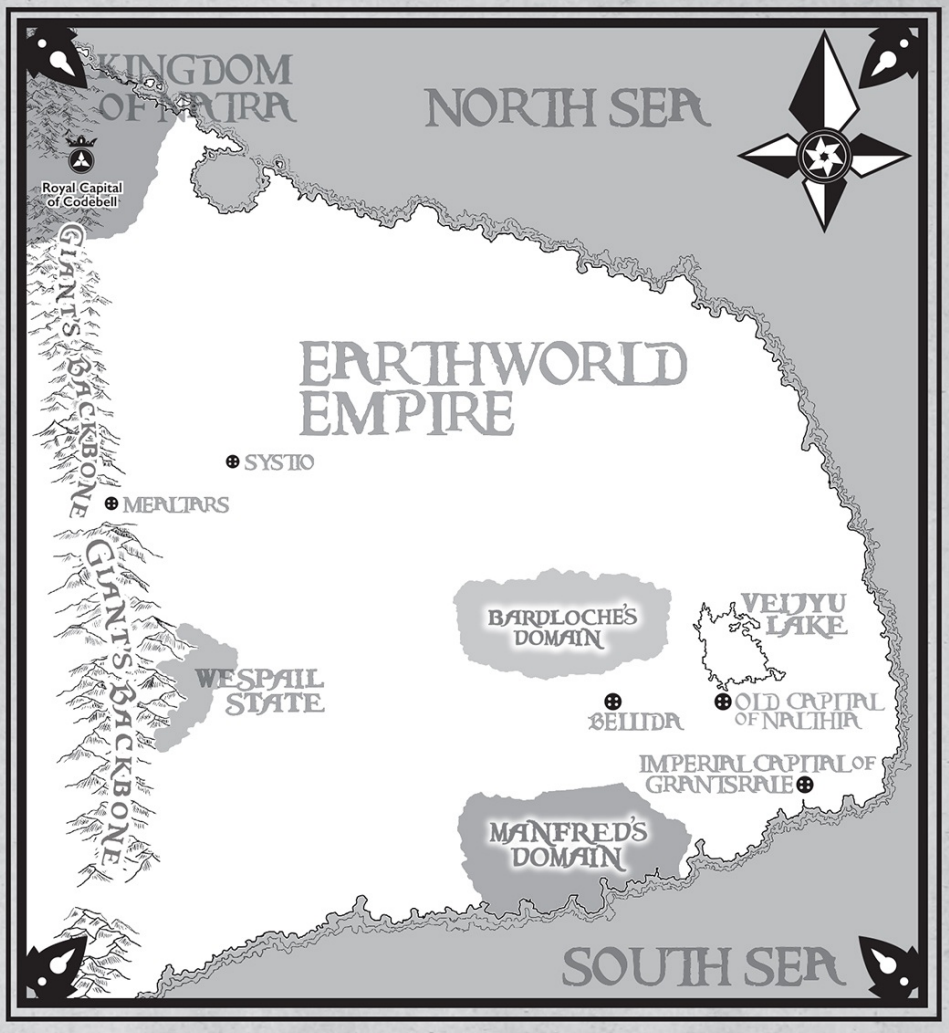

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Character Profiles

WEIN

Prince regent of the continent's northernmost country, the Kingdom of Natra. A born genius who rescued his nation from many a disaster.

LOWELLMINA

The Second Imperial Princess. A vixen who aims to be the first female monarch in the continent's history. Befriended Wein and the others when she secretly entered the military academy as "Lowa."

STRANG

Wein's friend from his exchange studies in the Empire. A sly, bespectacled man. Serves as an advisor in Prince Manfred's army.

BARDLOCHE

The Second Imperial Prince. A military man well versed in the art of war. Lost a majority of his strength after a surprise attack by the Kingdom of Falcasso.

NINYM

Wein's childhood friend and his Heart. Serves as his aide in the public and the private spheres. Part of the Flahm, a group that's persecuted in the West.

GLEN

Wein's friend from his exchange studies in the Empire. A swordsman through and through. Serves as an officer in Prince Bardloche's army.

KESKINEL

The Imperial Prime Minister, known as a bit of an oddball. He has remained neutral without interfering in the princes' fight for succession.

MANFRED

The Third Imperial Prince. A silver-tongued man promising future rewards. He controls the provinces. Lost most of his influence along with Bardloche.

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Chapter 1 | Hey, How About Becoming Empress?

Summer.

The season when the sun's brilliance neared its zenith, the earth was a carpet of vivid blossoms, and the footprints of animals wandering the fields revealed a pep in their step.

Normally, the people would be just as excited to be outside and soak up the rays. However, their attitude this year differed from the norm slightly.

Premonition was to blame.

They lacked solid evidence and couldn't explain the logic behind the feeling. Still, everyone harbored the vague suspicion that something big was on the horizon. This sentiment echoed across the continent, and humanity had every reason to be nervous.

The Imperial Capital of the Earthworld Empire, Grantsrale, was a melting pot of cultures and peoples. It was the symbol of a land that continued to invade and annex its neighbors. A peculiar summer destined to leave a mark in the annals of history loomed over the city.

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"I apologize for calling both of you on such short notice. I understand you're awfully busy," said a girl with a voice like a bell. She had vivacious eyes and luscious hair that shone like gold. Her fine figure and straight back reflected her exceptional upbringing.

Such was to be expected of the Second Imperial Princess Lowellmina Earthworld, one who stood at the pinnacle of Imperial society.

"I had hoped to contact you earlier, but I'm afraid I've been occupied as well," she continued.

Lowellmina sat in a room of the capital's Imperial Palace, which functioned

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as a private residence for the Emperor and his family. Across the table from her were two young men around Lowellmina's age.

The first was an imposing, dyed-in-the-wool military officer who looked uncomfortable in his formal attire. The other was a slim civil official whose mannerisms lent him an air of intelligence and sophistication. The two were polar opposites at a glance, yet neither seemed nervous or uneasy in the princess's presence. In fact, one could even say they were pretty relaxed.

This made perfect sense. The three were old friends, after all.

"I'm pleased you have accepted my invitation, Glen, Strang."

The name Glen Markham belonged to the military officer, while Strang Nanos was the civil servant's moniker. Lowellmina was the girl formerly known as Lowa Felbis. The trio had spent their days together as friends at the Empire's military academy.

"Honestly, I was pretty confused," Glen admitted. "Our current positions should've made it impossible to meet like this."

"I do not concern myself with status."

Unlike Lowellmina, a royal, Glen belonged to one of the Empire's lesser noble families. Strang hailed from one of the nation's annexed provinces. Indeed, neither of the men would have had the chance to speak with her so casually under normal circumstances, even with their shared past at the academy.

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However, that wasn't Glen's point, and Strang clarified his friend's statement.

"Social status is one matter…but more importantly, we now each belong to separate factions."

At present, three members of the Earthworld Empire's ruling family—Second Prince Bardloche, Third Prince Manfred, and Second Princess Lowellmina—were embattled for the throne. Each led a faction, with Glen and Strang serving Bardloche and Manfred, respectively. Simply put, the three gathered here were enemies from a tactical standpoint.

"I have no qualms over that either. One's public and private lives are two separate matters, no?"

Lowellmina's words were more sincere than mere consideration for old friends. She spoke from the heart. Her ability to view the situation as an open-and-shut case was impressive, but the men remained less than enthusiastic.

"It's not that simple, y'know."

"Even if *we* agree with you, there is still the issue of whether or not those around us will follow suit."

Despite belonging to different factions, both men had answered Lowellmina's summons. Outsiders may have suspected collusion. Naturally, this meeting was clandestine; Glen and Strang wouldn't have a leg to stand on if exposed.

"Nevertheless, you have both answered my invitation. I take it you've determined you possess the leeway to speak with me?"

"Well, I can't argue that," Glen said with a wry smile. "So why *did* you call us here? It's not like we're in any position to shoot the breeze and reminisce on an old friendship. Don't tell me you're gonna try to convince us to defect?"

"And if I said I was?"

""I refuse,"" Glen and Strang replied in unison.

"Gaaaah," Lowellmina groused. "Can't you at least think it over? My side is currently the horse to beat, right?"

Her remark was no exaggeration. The Imperial Family had attempted several fierce schemes since the war for succession began several years prior, placing Lowellmina's camp two steps ahead of the competition. Moreover, such a sizable lead convinced many fence-sitters to flock to the most promising faction. This afforded Lowellmina more resources and perpetuated a cycle of victory in which the very scent of success promoted its own realization.

If anything, the current problem was the countless people who hoped for the

chance to meet the princess and leave an impression. Lowellmina groaned at the long line that seemed to form almost daily.

It's not a great time for us to be in her favor, at least as far as those guys are concerned, Strang thought.

Lowellmina had personally invited Glen and Strang to her headquarters.

Were it possible to buy the seats the pair currently occupied, people would have scraped together every last coin in their purses. These two men did not share that eagerness, however.

"For now, I've decided to serve Prince Bardloche. I can't just switch sides arbitrarily."

"*Hahhh.* Ah yes, your manly machismo. Loyalty is fashionable only if you have the upper hand. When on a sinking ship, it's best to swiftly cut your losses and jump to a different one. Admittedly, I was the one who sank yours, though!"

"…"

Glen had no clue whether to fear Lowellmina, feel exasperated, or blush at his own powerlessness.

"Strang, do you agree with Glen?"

"Prince Manfred is vital to me, but I do not harbor the same devotion," he replied with a shrug. Such blasphemy would enrage his fellow faction members if only they'd heard. He hadn't changed at all since their school days.

"However," Strang continued, "in the event His Highness does take the throne, he has promised to grant my home of Wespail full autonomy. So long as Prince Manfred keeps his word, I'm afraid betrayal is out of the question."

Wespail looked out upon the Giant's Backbone, the mountain range that split the continent. Strang's dearest wish was independence for his homeland.

"Wespail, you say? I've heard it remains prosperous even in these dark times. I'm terribly jealous."

The substantial amount of civil unrest incited by the conflict for the throne had left people on edge as the Empire's economy slumped. If Wespail was prospering regardless, it was bound to become the object of envy.

"Yes, thankfully. However, that is precisely why the Empire has no desire to relinquish it. Wespail is a key financial resource."

"…What if *I* promised you independence?"

Strang smiled. "It's pointless to presume the impossible, Lowa. You've absorbed the conservatives from Prince Demetrio's faction but have no idea how to deal with them, do you?"

"Gwah."

First Prince Demetrio had initially battled his brothers for the throne but lost a political bout with Lowellmina's side. He was presently secluded in the countryside. The princess had seized control of Demetrio's sect. Unfortunately, his conservatives didn't appreciate her progressive mindset, and a hazy trench had formed between them.

Demetrio himself was indifferent to the provinces, but the traditionalists who comprised the majority of his faction thought provincial autonomy was outrageous. If Lowellmina casually promised independence for the provinces, the fissure between her original supporters and those taken from Demetrio would only widen. That possibility was enough to threaten even her currently prosperous forces. Lowellmina wished to avoid that at all costs.

"I've been reviewing the situation, but the conservatives and I can't meet halfway since we both have reputations to uphold…" she grumbled. "Alas, very well. I never intended to propose betrayal in this manner anyhow."

This wasn't a defensive response to rejection. Lowellmina truly had no intention of inspiring the men to defect.

"If that were my goal, I'd take a more ruthless tactic."

Glen and Strang knew exactly what she meant. Moreover, they were certain that even if the three had met with one of their own factions in the lead, none would urge betrayal or agree to it.

As to why…

"Settlin' things that way just wouldn't sit well."

Each member of the trio recognized the others' strengths.

Glen's military prowess.

Strang's sharp tactical eye.

Lowellmina's knack for showcasing her talents during political strife.

Each ability was a unique yet effective blade that got the job done.

Thus, all three wished to know for certain who would win when they clashed.

"Well, victory will surely be mine!" Lowellmina announced with a carefree smile.

The two men's expressions turned sullen. They were dying to argue, but there was no question that the princess's faction held the upper hand.

"By the way, I've called you here today for one reason only. To hear my declaration as both friends and foes."

"A declaration, huh?"

"That's right. Glen, Strang. Soon, I shall put an end to this battle for the throne."

Both immediately shot her a sharp glance.

"You serious?"

"Of course. After all, we cannot allow the situation to drag on and weaken the Empire further. Therefore, I am moving ahead with my plan."

"…That's true. It's been a while since His Majesty's passing. Every Imperial citizen is praying for the conflict to end soon."

The Earthworld Empire had been sinking deeper into exhaustion since the last Emperor passed away from an illness. Its golden age of prosperity had vanished, leaving only a sense of entrapment. That was why Lowellmina had announced her plan to end it here.

"Ah, and in the event I do become Empress, you both shall serve as my vassals. There will be absolutely no running away."

"…Hey, if I lose, then I'm at your service. Assuming I don't die, that is," Glen replied.

"In any case, as Empress, you'd have the entire Empire at your fingertips. Would we really be necessary?" Strang asked.

"Why, whatever do you mean? Aides trustworthy in both character and skill are exceedingly rare. To knowingly allow such boons to do as they pleased would be a terrible loss for the nation. We must pull the weary Empire from this period of civil unrest; there is no such thing as too much help."

Yes, the throne was a highly sought-after prize, but the Earthworld Empire's journey would not end once someone claimed it. Even if Bardloche or Manfred ruled instead of Lowellmina, there was still the monumental task of rebuilding the nation. As vassals, Glen and Strang would also naturally have a load of responsibilities. All three were readying themselves for the war's aftermath.

"…We can't leave *them* waiting too long either," Lowellmina muttered.

The others immediately knew to whom she referred.

"I wonder what they're doin' right about now."

"One is up to something as usual, I'm sure."

"And the other is complainin' while she lends a hand."

"Yes, most assuredly."

All three envisioned the same pair. They smirked at the shared thought.

"We *are* talking about Wein and Ninym, after all."

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"…Huh?"

Crown Prince Wein Salema Arbalest of the Natra Kingdom suddenly lifted his head.

"Oh? What is it, Your Highness?"

"Nah, don't mind me. I thought I heard someone calling my name in the distance," Wein said with a glance to his aide, Ninym Ralei, beside him.

"You hear anything, Ninym?"

"Not in particular."

The Flahm girl with distinct alabaster hair and red eyes read the question in her master's eyes and shook her head lightly. Wein knew she would've dismissed it as his imagination.

"Your Highness's renown has spread across the continent. The sounds of the citizens singing your praise must have carried on the wind."

"Now you've got me blushing. Still, if *I've* become a household name, their cries of glory to God must be filling the heavens. Right, Sir Yuan?"

Wein moved his attention from Ninym to the person across the table.

A young man named Yuan sat before Wein in a parlor of Natra's Willeron Palace. Despite his gentle demeanor, Yuan inspired a vague inkling that one ought to keep on their guard around him, and for good reason. He was a follower of the Eastern Levetia religion, which had spread across the Eastern continent, and its emissary to Natra.

"Indeed, Your Highness. Our many voices gather at God's knee, and I have no doubt God hears every prayer."

"But won't heaven be troubled by so much company?"

"Perish the thought. The power of the divine can easily embrace every voice in a single arm."

The pair's friendly conversation continued, but Yuan had not come all this way for a light chat. As an emissary of Eastern Levetia, he had a duty to fulfill.

"Well then, Sir Yuan. Might I ask what brought you here today?"

As Wein cut to the heart of the matter, Yuan took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"Of course. As I mentioned earlier, the Leader of Eastern Levetia, His Grace Ernesto, wishes to meet with Your Highness. Will you kindly make the journey, even if only once?"

Eastern Levetia was an offshoot of the Levetia religion, which was deeply rooted in the Western continent. The followers of each worshipped the same deity and upheld largely similar doctrines. However, the faiths' institutional frameworks differed somewhat.

In the Teachings of Levetia, the Holy King stood at the very top of the hierarchy while Holy King candidates known as Holy Elites served beneath him. The majority of Holy Elites were powerful nobles or royals who held significant positions in both religious and secular spheres.

Eastern Levetia, on the other hand, was commanded by a Leader whose successor was chosen from among their subordinates. However, it was imperative that none possessed worldly rank.

As for the logic behind this…

Eastern Levetia was born from a disgruntled anger for the Holy Elites, who twisted the doctrine to suit their own agenda.

The Holy King and Elites who occupied the upper echelons of the Levetia faith also possessed political and financial sway and considered religion to be another way to maintain control. It could be said that interpreting and amending doctrine to suit one's personal needs was an inevitability born from structural cracks in the foundation.

And that's why Eastern Levetia refuses to appoint a secular Leader.

Nearly every Leader of Eastern Levetia had been an average citizen. Those of high birth were typically kept at arm's length.

Even Ernesto was originally a teacher in his hometown.

Leader candidacy was as simple as acquiring endorsement from a certain number of fellow believers, but this also meant a larger pool of applicants. During the selection ceremony, tests of dignity and doctrine, along with others for physical and mental fortitude, sifted out undesirables.

Ernesto, the latest winner, wants a sit-down with me…

Needless to say, such a request wasn't a matter of mere curiosity. The man undoubtedly harbored some political motive. This would usually be the moment when Wein contemplated his answer while digging for his opponent's intentions. However…

"I'd like to meet His Grace Ernesto as well. This must be some kind of fate. I'm sure the Leader of Eastern Levetia and I will have plenty to talk about."

"Oh!" Yuan exclaimed with a gratified smile. "His Grace will be most pleased. I will make the arrangements immediately."

"Yes, please do," Wein replied with a magnanimous nod.

In truth, he would have preferred a bit more back-and-forth, but it couldn't be helped. He let his opponent win this time. However, an audience was all Wein intended to concede.

"Sir Yuan, I'd like for His Grace to visit Natra, rather than the other way

around. What is your opinion?"

Yuan grimaced slightly. "Hmm…"

His reaction was understandable. If Yuan agreed, the Leader of Eastern Levetia would have to travel to distant Natra and appear subservient in the eyes of society. Yuan was surely keen on preventing that. On the other hand, if Wein visited His Grace Ernesto, Natra might appear beholden to Eastern Levetia. Townsfolk would have found the matter comical, but for those cloaked in the invisible armor of authority, this was a vital negotiation to determine who buckled first.

"His Grace's daily prayers for peace in the Empire have kept our people in good spirits. I understand that you are terribly busy as well, Your Highness, but their hearts will grow paralyzed with confusion if our Leader travels abroad. As an allied nation, I would assume this would not be in Natra's best interests either."

Yuan subtly used the Empire citizens as hostages, so that Wein would come to them. However, the prince wouldn't be brushed aside so easily.

"That is my very point, Sir Yuan. The dispute among the Imperial siblings has taxed the Empire significantly and created a situation that might erupt into open war at any moment. Were I, a foreign royal, to arrive in the Empire and meet with your greatest religious figure…it would agitate some tempers, wouldn't you say?"

"Ngh…that's…"

"And if everything came to a boiling point during our conversation, it would endanger me and His Grace Ernesto. A discussion in Natra will ensure relative safety in the event of disaster in the Empire."

Cowed by Wein's logical explanation, Yuan fell speechless for a few moments as he gathered his thoughts. Then finally…

"…I wish to consider your proposal further in the Empire."

Wein nodded in satisfaction at what was essentially a declaration of surrender.

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He got me…

After the meeting adjourned and Yuan excused himself, he sighed mentally as he traveled down a hallway of the royal palace with his retinue.

Wein was not an adversary to be taken lightly. Yuan had known this before

entering the conversation, but the crown prince had pinpointed the smallest gap and used it to trap Yuan.

There is no question Wein is her elder brother.

Still, Yuan had no intention of backing down completely. For the rest of his stay in Natra, he'd have to devise a counterattack and lead Prince Wein to the Empire.

A familiar face interrupted his thoughts.

"My, if it isn't Princess Falanya."

"Oh, Yuan."

Yuan offered the girl before him a deep bow. Her cherubic appearance could not mask her dignified air. She was Falanya Elk Arbalest, and as her name indicated, she was Wein's little sister and Natra's crown princess, the very girl Yuan had been thinking of.

"Have you finished speaking with my brother?"

"Yes. Several details still need to be ironed out, but Prince Wein has agreed to meet with His Grace Ernesto. This would not be possible without your aid, Princess Falanya."

"He-he, I really didn't do much," Falanya said with a faint blush.

Falanya and Yuan first met at a ceremony held by the neighboring Delunio Kingdom. They had formed a strong bond there after working together to overcome some trouble. Before Yuan's visit to Natra, he'd called upon Falanya to ask if she could act as an intermediary between himself and Wein.

"Returning from Delunio to the Empire only to arrive here in Natra soon afterward must be tiring," Falanya remarked.

"I will do anything with a joyful heart if it is for Eastern Levetia and my God," Yuan answered with a smile. "I must say, the young lady before me seems far more harried."

"…You can tell?"

"With all due respect, your appearance is quite fatigued," he observed.

Falanya pressed both hands against her cheeks.

Yuan's supposition was correct. Falanya had been running about nonstop lately. She'd accomplished far more than intended during her recent trip to Delunio as an ambassador. The princess was only supposed to act as Wein's assistant, but wound up being considered his proxy in name and substance. The other day, Natra's vassals had decided they didn't want to entrust all the responsibility and authority to Wein, so Falanya suddenly acquired more work than ever.

“ I also sense that your exhaustion is not merely physical.”

“…You can tell that, too?” Falanya appeared surprised.

Yuan nodded. “I wouldn’t be much of an emissary if I ignored the complexions of others. If something concerns you, I shall gladly lend an ear.”

“…” Falanya was hesitant. Yuan observed the princess in silence, waiting for her to speak. “Can you keep a secret?”

“For the princess to whom I owe so much, this glib tongue will be as still as a boulder.”

“I don’t mean to get your hopes up.” Falanya smiled lightly at Yuan’s exaggerated gestures. “There’s simply something I must do.”

“…”

“I take no joy in it, but it’s likely unavoidable. My fear of that moment has kept me up at night lately.”

“Why are you so frightened?”

“Because I feel it will overthrow everything I have accepted as normal,” Falanya confessed weakly.

Yuan gazed at her with a quiet sigh. He didn’t know what plagued the princess, but it was obviously a complex dilemma with no easy solution. His younger merchant self would have smoothly pried for details, but Yuan was a follower of Eastern Levetia now. There was only one course of action when in the presence of a troubled young lady.

“Trials and tribulations are an inevitable facet of life. We go to great lengths to elude them, but our efforts are so often in vain. Ultimately, we must concede and face reality. One cannot escape this.”

Falanya didn’t take her eyes off Yuan as he continued, “We either experience loss in the course of overcoming such ordeals or cross a point of no return. However, life persists, and new opportunities arise beyond those challenges. Your true priority should be what you will accomplish after the storm. An enormous flower will surely bloom from your keen wit, Princess Falanya.”

“What I’ll accomplish…”

Yuan smiled and gave a light nod. “In short, you should press forward without worrying too much. It’s important to reflect on occasion, but in my experience, an eighty-twenty ratio is ideal.”

Falanya hummed softly. After mulling Yuan’s words over for a moment, she said, her voice nearly a whisper, “…I’ll do my best.”

“Then my unpolished sermon may be considered a success.”

Yuan hadn’t expected to dispel her concerns completely. However, the

princess's profile was somewhat livelier than moments before, so his efforts hadn't been in vain.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I must be going."

"No, my apologies for keeping you." Yuan offered another reverent bow. "May our paths cross again soon, Princess Falanya."

"Yes. I look forward to that day," Falanya said with a grin before turning on her heel.

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"Are you sure about this? You agreed to meet so readily," Ninym asked.

With Yuan gone, it was just her and Wein.

"An official meeting with the Leader of Eastern Levetia might rouse the Empire, and Levetia won't be too pleased either."

Both sects refused to recognize each other and remained hostile. Natra aligned closer to the West in a religious sense, but it was on better terms with the Empire politically. Balance was the key, and Ninym's remark was meant as a reminder that any negotiations were likely to disrupt that.

Wein had an explanation at the ready, however.

"I know Falanya and Yuan really hit it off, but Lowellmina wants me to keep up appearances. I guess it's out of our hands."

Princess Lowellmina was responsible for this potential meeting with Ernesto. Wein had asked her for a favor earlier, and Lowellmina later requested Eastern Levetia's help to make it happen. In return, she wanted Wein to meet with Ernesto because of the demands Eastern Levetia put on *her*.

In a sense, Wein was simply getting his just deserts. Nevertheless, Natra was an allied nation. Wein couldn't ignore the princess's request.

"Circumstances aside, I *am* interested in Ernesto."

"It seems that candidates for Eastern Levetia's Leader selection ceremony must endure numerous trials under the watchful eye of believers… Quite different from the West."

"The East split because of a hatred for the West's way of doing things. To the East, choosing a Leader based on character and skill rather than lineage and rank is the true way for the faith."

What kind of man was Ernesto, really? The corner of Wein's mouth twitched faintly with curiosity. Ninym poked his cheek.

"Your vassals will throw a fit if you don't consult them, so you should take

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appropriate measures."

"Oh yeah. That's a good point."

Wein's recent wild antics had left his relationship with his vassals strained. They trusted his ability, of course, and understood that his resourcefulness and leadership skills had led Natra to prosperity. However, hindsight was twenty-twenty. Assuming everything would always be fine would be ill-advised.

"I wonder how long it'd take my vassals to unanimously agree, if at all."

"It still seems risky to decide on your own."

"You can't please everybody," Wein replied with a shrug. "At any rate, I'll get them on my side. That's why we're having the meeting in Natra."

"You still intend to hold the conference here?"

Wein nodded with a wry smile. "Of course. If I leave the country again, their complaints will only grow louder. The situation might change if something happens in the Empire or the West, though."

"As a vassal, I pray that doesn't happen." Ninym heaved a small sigh. She meant every word.

Unfortunately, her prayer went unanswered.

A few days after the meeting with Yuan, an unthinkable rumor arrived in Natra. One that spoke of Princess Lowellmina's assassination.

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Chapter 2 | The Die Is Cast

To the citizens of the Empire, Lowellmina Earthworld was a multifaceted girl. More precisely, she was a girl who had built up many layers of nuance over the past several years.

Said to be intelligent and beautiful beyond compare, she was born the younger daughter of Earthworld's great Emperor. The people cherished her with an honest, straightforward love.

However, politics remained the undisputed realm of men. Despite her impeccable lineage, Lowellmina was a woman. For a long time, she never stood on the diplomatic stage, and the populace preferred to keep it that way.

Everything changed with the passing of the previous Emperor. Momentum and support among the three princes declined as they squabbled for the throne, and favor for Lowellmina rose to prominence. She urged the princes to focus on peace and stability, fighting to those ends. Lowellmina was the people's princess, and her steadfast, honest efforts made her the heart of Earthworld.

And that very same Lowellmina Earthworld had just been assassinated.

The capital, where she had been staying, was especially devastated when the news first broke in the Empire.

"Princess Lowellmina was assassinated?!"

"How could this happen?! I don't believe it!"

"Are we certain it's true?!"

Princess Lowellmina, an advocate for peace who devoted herself to the Empire, had suffered an untimely death. The shocked citizens fell into a deep, troubled sorrow, but their lament was silenced mere days later…

…when the Empire's Prime Minister Keskinel officially announced that reports of Lowellmina's death had been a case of misinformation.

“Hmph… Today seems like another rousing success,” Keskinel muttered as he peered out a window of his manor.

Although in the prime of life, the man carried an aura of mediocrity. He was a top-ranking official who had supported the late Emperor. His eminent status guaranteed his name would be carved into history. However, if one were to judge solely by appearance, he seemed more likely to be found sitting in a back alley with a drink in one hand than standing by the Emperor’s side as Prime Minister.

“Is support for Princess Lowellmina truly this ardent?”

Keskinel stared at the throng gathered before his estate. The people were relieved by his announcement. Princess Lowellmina’s well-being was all that mattered, more so than how the rumor of her demise had begun. She would surely make an appearance in good health to allay lingering unease…or so people thought.

Despite their restless anticipation, she had yet to emerge. Anxiety ate away at every heart and planted the seeds of doubt.

Was Princess Lowellmina truly safe? What if she actually *was* dead? Perhaps she’d barely survived the assassination and was bedridden with terrible injuries? Could this be a ruse to skip out on her responsibilities?

Speculations on Princess Lowellmina ranged from health concerns to whispers of debauchery, culminating in the crowd that had gathered in front of Keskinel’s manor in search of answers.

“Shall I send them away?” asked the subordinate by his side.

Keskinel slowly shook his head. “It’s not like they can break in, so leave them be. More importantly,” he continued, “our true focus has arrived.”

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. When Keskinel granted entry, a young woman appeared.

“Good day, Keskinel. This is quite a splendid manor,” Lowellmina Earthworld said with a smile.

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“I see there are plenty of oddities here, too, just as there are in your office in the Imperial Palace.”

Lowellmina entered the room and looked around curiously. The furnishings in the room lacked a sense of unity, and many were twisted into bizarre shapes. Mysterious folk art of unknown origins filled the space. The Prime Minister was

a famed eccentric in the Empire, and he lived up to his reputation.

While the princess thought on this, she picked up a gold vessel that sat on a skewed shelf.

"Keskinel, what's inside this?"

"Dried spiders."

"…"

Lowellmina gently placed the container back on its shelf.

"They are edible, so please help yourself."

"I'm fine, thank you," she firmly replied, yet she continued poking around.

"Well then, Princess Lowellmina," Keskinel said with seriousness in his tone. "How long will you be visiting with us?"

"Oh dear. Why are you making such a face, Keskinel?" Lowellmina asked as she sat across from him with a provocative smile. "You speak as if my presence here is a problem."

"Indeed."

"Whaaa?" she replied in charming protest, but he ignored her.

"As Prime Minister of the Earthworld Empire, my responsibility is to its well-being. This includes aiding the future Emperor. Therefore…"

"You can't take any sides in the battle for succession, right?" Lowellmina shrugged. "What an honorable attitude. As both a royal and a citizen of the Empire, I'm highly impressed."

"Judging by your tone, I'm not the least bit convinced."

"I speak the truth and feel personally grateful. Had you supported any of the princes, this civil war would have ended in a heartbeat and left me no room to intervene. However"—Lowellmina paused—"I *do* wonder why you've gone to such lengths to remain impartial. If you were motivated by a love for the people or wished to do what's best for the Empire, wouldn't you desire a swift resolution?"

Lowellmina would never have set foot in the manor if that were the case. She had no intention of complaining about Keskinel's neutrality, yet his vague motives bothered her.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding. I, too, possess love and ambition."

"I'm just saying it doesn't look that way."

"That's because I have purposefully chosen not to announce it to the entire world."

"Oh dear. Is that a criticism of the Imperial Family, whose members clash and crackle with ambition? I must call the military police."

“Have you forgotten that I command them?”

“And yet you remain ‘neutral.’”

Lowellmina shrugged while Keskinel eyed her.

“Your Highness, I understand your apprehension. And if I may be so bold…I deeply treasure this Empire. My own heart has told me to align with no one.”

“…”

Lowellmina stared at Keskinel. He’d served by the previous Emperor’s side since she was a small child, and even if he didn’t act like some starry-eyed maiden, she knew his patriotic love was genuine.

“We’ve gotten a bit off track. At any rate, I must remain impartial, and your presence in my manor threatens that. I ask for your understanding.”

Keskinel’s tone was composed, but a force just below the surface brooked no room for debate. Lowellmina hardly felt beaten, but she nodded lightly in acceptance.

“I do so wish we could have cooperated, but I’ll respect your decision. However, we mustn’t forget who is responsible for both the failed attempt on my life and the ensuing chaos.”

“Ngh…”

Troubling rumors of Lowellmina’s assassination had upset the people, but they would realize they were false when they saw her alive and well. Yet although she lived, there had been an attempt on her life.

“Ah, I was so shocked. To think I would be suddenly attacked in the Imperial Palace… If my valiant guards had not driven back the assailant, I would have surely fallen.” The princess shook her head theatrically. “To try and kill a member of the Imperial Family within this very capital is unheard of and has greatly tarnished the Empire’s authority. Moreover, without an Emperor, the onus for whatever happens in Grantsrale naturally falls on you, Keskinel.”

“…”

Lowellmina’s words were more than a false accusation. In addition to commanding the military police, Keskinel carried the responsibility of defending the capital and the Imperial Palace. Lowellmina’s personal guard had successfully avoided the worst outcome, but that would hardly protect Keskinel and his guard regiments from criticism.

“Perhaps…you intentionally slackened our defenses, Keskinel?” Lowellmina openly provoked the Prime Minister.

“…I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Keskinel grimaced slightly, but the princess’s taunts weren’t the reason for

his sour mood. It was the fact that he'd already predicted how this conversation would end and had realized he was trapped.

"In that case, you should have no trouble capturing our would-be assassins and making them reveal their client," Lowellmina declared. "In the meantime, I shall remain here. The Imperial Palace is dangerous. The manor of the Empire's current commander-in-chief will be much safer. Wouldn't you agree?" she asked with a bewitching smile.

Keskinel could only sigh.

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"Imperial Princess or not, how shameless can one woman be?!" exclaimed an aide.

"Please calm down. Princess Lowellmina is the victim here, and our ill-preparation is undeniable."

Once Lowellmina had left the room, Keskinel's disgruntled subordinate was free to converse with the contemplative Prime Minister.

"Still, it won't be long before everyone learns that Princess Lowellmina is staying at the manor. This will surely damage Your Excellency's unbiased position. In fact, it will be impossible to deny reckless accusations that you were an active participant!"

"Yes, I'm aware. Have you learned anything from the trace evidence found in the assassins' stronghold?"

"My apologies. Unfortunately, we've had no favorable results yet."

Keskinel groaned quietly.

Even the Prime Minister couldn't hide his surprise when news arrived that Lowellmina had been attacked, but his response had been swift. He had requested confirmation of the princess's safety and sent every trusted soldier in the capital after the fleeing assassins. It wasn't long before several reports pinpointed the assailants' hideout, and a raid unit was quickly sortied.

Unfortunately, they were too slow. The culprits were nowhere to be found, and all information about their identities and scheme had been destroyed. Keskinel's people were still analyzing the scant surviving evidence.

"Fear not, Your Excellency. I assure you those responsible shall be apprehended. Considering the circumstances, only Second Prince Bardloche or Third Prince Manfred could have issued such an order. If we can close the net around them…"

“That’s easier said than done,” Keskinel mumbled. “The way I see it, this situation isn’t so straightforward.”

“It’s not? What do you mean…?”

Keskinel explained the predicament to his perplexed subordinate.

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“Princess Lowellmina was almost assassinated…?!”

“Yes. Word is spreading throughout the capital.”

Three top officials were gathered with Third Prince Manfred at his manor. They all scowled at the messenger’s report, reeling with shock.

“That’s ridiculous! An attempt on the life of an Imperial royal from inside the capital?!”

“What a disgrace! The world will mock us as a land defended by fools!”

“What the heck is Keskinel doing…?! More importantly, where did the assailants even come from?!”

“Surely Bardloche must have sent them.”

“That simpleton! How stupid can one person be?! Now even *more* citizens will flock to Princess Lowellmina!”

The officials could not disguise their consternation as they discussed the situation.

Lowellmina’s brisk progress was a nuisance for Manfred’s faction. He would have gained an incredible advantage had she genuinely died. However, Manfred and his aides had concluded that assassination was too risky. Whether it was a success or, as in this case, a failure, the result would be the same.

If the princess *had* perished, news would have spread worldwide that Bardloche and Manfred fought dirty, and that the Imperial Family deserved the same for its cruel methods. In short, the royals’ reputations and the Empire’s authority would suffer.

Did Bardloche deserve Manfred’s scorn for such an ill-advised stunt, or had the Second Prince determined there was no other path to the throne? Either way, this was an inconvenient development for the Third Prince and his faction.

“…Strang.”

“Yes.”

Strang stepped forward at Manfred’s call. Despite his young age, the prince had previously promoted him to a high-ranking position, affording him command of various political and military matters. Others naturally opposed

this, but Strang's accomplishments prevented them from criticizing him publicly.

"What do you make of the situation?"

"As the others have said, it's natural to presume Bardloche's faction is responsible," Strang answered eloquently. "The throne is nearly within Princess Lowellmina's grasp. Prince Bardloche, on the other hand, is stuck in a difficult position. Princess Lowellmina's death would have been a fortuitous tipping of the scales for him."

"But would Bardloche even opt for such methods?"

Second Prince Bardloche wasn't the brightest when it came to political strategy, but he was an accomplished soldier proficient in the military arts. Manfred couldn't imagine his brother resorting to a covert killing, especially if the target was a frail woman.

"It's conceivable that he resorted to assassination after feeling driven into a corner. Or perhaps one of his subordinates devised the scheme without Prince Bardloche's knowledge."

"My allies and his are low on morale. Maybe he's lost control of the reins," Manfred said. Quietly, he added, "I'm no different." He tossed a cold glance at the officials talking around him.

The members of his faction hadn't pledged unwavering loyalty. Those with a powerful sense of allegiance were few and far between. Almost everyone who supported Manfred and the Imperial Family acted out of self-interest, hoping to reap the benefits once he was crowned Emperor.

Furthermore, Lowellmina had come out on top after the siblings' long, calculated struggle for the throne, and the princes' followers were increasingly worried they'd wind up with nothing. Manfred had promised future benefits to the provinces. He couldn't expect loyalty. Undoubtedly, these officials constantly searched for opportunities to jump ship and save themselves.

Well, that just makes 'em easier to use.

To Manfred, bonds of loyalty were dangerous. Profit was much more manageable and straightforward.

Strang felt the same. Manfred had hired the man for his talent, but it was overwhelmingly obvious that Strang's greatest desire was to earn independence for his native Wespail. And so the Third Prince had promised to grant its freedom once he became Emperor. So long as no other faction made the same offer, Strang would not betray him.

It's not like I have to keep my end of the bargain anyway, Manfred thought

before addressing the room. “At any rate, I just wish Bardloche hadn’t screwed up.”

“It was a foregone conclusion. After all, the Empire is currently in the palm of Princess Lowellmina’s hand.”

“I know, but I’m still disappointed.”

Had Bardloche succeeded, the upset would have allowed Manfred to rush in and steal the throne if he played his cards right.

As his liege contemplated, Strang quietly offered a thought. “Perhaps he was doomed to fail from the very start.”

Manfred threw Strang a baffled look. “What do you mean?”

“Bardloche’s faction is the main suspect, but what if…”

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“Assassinate Lowellmina…?!”

Bardloche jumped out of his chair after a report arrived at his estate from his trusted retainer Lorencio.

“That’s idiotic! What’s goin’ on?!” Bardloche shouted hoarsely.

“My deepest apologies. I acted of my own accord without Your Highness’s permission…” Lorencio replied, his head bowed in shame. “Everything was done in preparation for Your Highness’s grand ascension…! Please, I beg for your forgiveness…!”

“Hell no!” Bardloche roared vehemently. “What kind of pathetic excuse for a soldier fails to assassinate a female opponent?! You’ve destroyed whatever scrap of dignity we had left!”

Lowellmina’s faction currently held a significant lead over Bardloche’s. His men endured, thanks to their warriors’ pride, but this unexpected twist was like a knife to the heart.

“I understand your anger! However, please allow me to explain. While I schemed in secret, I did not actually fail!”

“Is this some kind of sick joke?!” Bardloche’s hand reached for the sword at his waist. He could easily slice a person’s head off with a single stroke, but Lorencio’s words spilled out before the prince had a chance.

“It is no jest! Before those I planted in the capital could act, someone else attacked Princess Lowellmina! The commotion that followed put my ambush at risk, so I had no choice but to abandon the mission and withdraw!”

“…!”

Bardloche's hand froze on his sword hilt. Although Lorencio's plot never came to fruition, he felt no inclination to forgive the man. Still, the Second Prince couldn't ignore the news that someone else had tried to kill Lowellmina.

"…Who's the other assassin?"

"I don't know. Most of the capital is convinced we are to blame, so no one seems interested in finding the true culprit. However, it is likely Manfred's faction…"

That made sense. Bardloche's own faction aside, his brother had the most to gain from Lowellmina's absence.

However…

"It wasn't Manfred," Bardloche muttered.

"What…?"

Lorencio's hypothesis had helped the Second Prince realize who really orchestrated this chain of events.

"I see. So that's how it's gonna be, huh?"

Bardloche cast a scowl at the empty eastern sky. Beyond the horizon lay the distant capital of Grantsrale.

"You win this round, Lowellmina!"

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"Yes, it was all *my* doing!"

Lowellmina shouted, "Yay!" and struck a victory pose from the comfort of her own room.

"Ahhh, yes, it really couldn't have gone better. But this is all in a day's work for us, right, Fyshe?"

"If you mean to say our success is thanks to the information network Your Highness maintains regularly, then I agree," replied Lowellmina's aide, Fyshe Blundell. "Without it, we wouldn't have been able to swiftly detect Bardloche's agents who slipped into the capital."

"Heh-heh, I certainly haven't just been playing around this whole time."

Unlike her brothers, Lowellmina had no domain of her own. Thus, she made the capital her base of operations, but the princess was more like a freeloader, unable to command the city as she pleased. Far from it, actually. It was the heart of the Empire, and Lowellmina had no right to tyrannically control who came and went. There were plenty of rival faction members in the capital as well.

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Therefore, she first had to guarantee her own safety. Lowellmina made every effort to build up her personal guard and the private information network she'd had since the previous Emperor's passing.

"Besides, I was thinking it was high time I took more direct measures."

Lowellmina's information network had captured a suspicious intruder several weeks ago.

The princess had then conducted a covert investigation, and once she'd confirmed it was Bardloche's people who'd plotted to kill her, she'd hit upon a rare opportunity.

"First, ruin their original plan by devising a fake failed assassination ahead of the real attempt. Then, spread the word about the would-be culprits and pretend like everything actually happened. Finally, hold Keskinel responsible and sabotage his neutrality… Everything went perfectly, if I do say so myself."

If it had simply been a matter of stopping their assassination plot, Lowellmina could have reported the criminals or captured them herself and been done with it. However, she used this opportunity to take a shot at Keskinel. Thanks to the princess's tactics, the Prime Minister now had no choice but to protect her and pursue the failed assassins to atone for his accidental contribution to the threat on her life.

Even so, Keskinel appeared to side with Lowellmina to the general public. Not only that, but his search would lead straight back to Bardloche. His position would force him to denounce the prince and validate everyone's suspicions that the Prime Minister of the Empire and the princess were allies.

"A number of influential leaders who have remained impartial thus far are already seeking an audience with Your Highness."

"Excellent. Let's make good use of their people, money, and resources. Oh, by the way, Fyshe, our plan to rouse the citizens is coming along nicely, I hope?"

"Yes. They've been quite passionate, so it's proceeding well."

Lowellmina smiled with clear satisfaction. "The princess, whose heart breaks daily as she laments the fate of the Empire, who was nearly murdered by her own brother, of all people… It's only natural for the populace to rise up in anger. Once we've fanned those flames into an inferno, I'll have a legitimate reason to gather an army."

Because of her reputation as a peacemaker, Lowellmina had no military. However, firepower was absolutely vital if she hoped to get rid of her two brothers and bring this war to a conclusion. Therefore, she needed a justifiable

reason to gather a military force that the citizens would accept and soldiers would fight for. Once Bardloche and Manfred fell to her lawful legion, the Empire would witness the birth of the continent's first female ruler.

"All right, onward to victory."

Lowellmina set out toward the triumphant path she had blazed herself.

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"That crafty little…!"

The subordinate couldn't help but shout when Keskinel revealed the truth of the situation.

"Mind your tongue. She's still our princess."

"Ah yes, pardon me. Still, are you sure about this, Your Excellency? Princess Lowellmina will undoubtedly use you as she pleases…!"

"There's nothing we can do. It's my fault for being outwitted."

The Empire had its own information network, as did Keskinel. Of course, they were mostly used for covertly gathering knowledge both domestically and abroad, but it was absolutely inexcusable that they'd allowed an assassin to slip into the capital and attack a royal.

"Still, I never imagined she'd corner me so completely."

A wry smile formed on Keskinel's lips. Lowellmina's character aside, she'd grown into a marvelous political strategist. He felt a sense of both happiness and grief.

"…At this rate, I suppose an Empress will be born soon."

There was an unease in the subordinate's expression and tone that wouldn't have existed if their conversation had centered around either of the princes. However, the Prime Minister didn't believe this attitude was worthy of reproach.

History's first female monarch.

Future historians would laud such a milestone, but there were too many unknown factors for those living in this era and land. Who wouldn't be afraid to watch their ship suddenly change course and sail an untraveled route?

"The brilliance of an Emperor's reign depends on the skill of their officials. An Empress won't change that. There's nothing to fear, so just focus on quietly serving the Empire."

"Yes…"

Keskinel sighed at his subordinate's reluctance.

"Besides, Princess Lowellmina's victory isn't yet guaranteed."

“Even so, the situation certainly appears to lean that way…”

The Prime Minister gave a small laugh.

“Such moments are when shadows creep in.”

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“Prince Bardloche, there is someone requesting an immediate audience with you.”

“Not now! Make them wait!”

“B-but they have insisted the matter is most urgent.”

“…I’ve already got enough to do! Who the heck is it?!”

“Ah yes, well… She is a female merchant named Ibis…”

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“Prince Manfred, this may be an excellent opportunity.”

“Opportunity? At a time like this?”

“Yes. However, I must humbly request Your Highness’s utmost cooperation. Let’s see… First, I would like for you to write a letter.”

“I can manage that much, but who’s it for?”

“Prince Wein.”

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“Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred won’t let things end here. Once cornered, they’ll drop all appearances and madly fight to the death.”

Keskinel’s subordinate instinctively gulped at these words. Despite the three candidates’ ongoing battle, there had yet to be a decisive clash. However, the situation was swiftly approaching its climax, and all bets were off.

“The die is cast. From this point forward, the fight for the throne will be settled with a final bout. As for what fate will roll us…”

Keskinel gave a fearless smile.

“…only the heavens know.”

"Fwaaah…"

Falanya stretched across the bed in her private chambers and let out a weary sigh.

"You seem pretty beat, Falanya," her guard Nanaki Ralei remarked as he stood nearby like a shadow.

"That's because I *am* tired. Haven't you been watching me run around lately, Nanaki?" the princess answered with a look of protest.

Her schedule had been busier than ever lately.

"Princess Falanya, about these applications…"

"I'll look them over in a bit, so please leave everything over there."

"I have several petitions from the citizens."

"I'll review them shortly."

"There is a leader who desires an audience with Your Highness."

"Do I have time available next week? If so, we can meet then."

"Your Highness, your next appointment is a visit with His Majesty."

"Please ask my father to wait just a while longer. I'll be there soon…!"

It was an unrelenting whirlwind. Government affairs dogged the princess day and night. Despite this long-awaited yet brief reprieve in the comfort of her own bedroom, Falanya still had a mountain of work. The phrase "worked to death" had never felt more literal.

Still…

Falanya rolled on the bed once, twice, three times, staring at her hand. It was small and delicate. Such fingers belonged to a sheltered girl who'd never known any hardship. She doubted they could hold a large suitcase, let alone carry the

fate of a nation.

"Are you worried?"

"…"

Falanya's busy to-do list wasn't the issue; if anything, she enjoyed it. Something else fueled her melancholy.

"That shady guy gave you advice, didn't he?"

"…Yuan isn't a bad person. I'll admit he's suspicious, though."

Yuan's wry smile popped into Falanya's mind, but she brushed the image away.

"Hey, Nanaki."

"Don't ask me."

"…But I haven't even said anything yet."

"I already know what you'll ask."

Falanya glared at him reproachfully, but Nanaki wasn't fazed in the slightest.

"I'll clear the way, but our direction is up to you, Falanya."

"Sheesh…"

She threw a nearby pillow at Nanaki, who blocked the projectile with ease and threw it back into her face. As Falanya peeled the pillow away, she muttered, "…I'm not really sure what to do."

Several years had passed since King Owen fell ill and Crown Prince Wein stepped up to lead the nation as regent. In the time since, Natra had enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and made its mark on the world stage. Everyone believed it was only a matter of time until Wein became king and ushered in a new age of stability for the nation. However, doubt had recently entered the equation, and some of Natra's vassals viewed Wein's antics as dangerous.

"But my brother is the reason we've come this far…"

Falanya spoke the truth. Wein was undeniably the main factor in Natra's swift success. He was a rare genius and skilled negotiator brave enough to face enemies in their own territories. These qualities ferried him to outstanding results, and it was obvious to anyone that history would remember Wein as a hero.

However, Natra was simultaneously dependent on the crown prince and subject to his whims. It felt like only Wein held any value, and that was the root of the problem. Each vassal also took pride in their duties, and those feelings ballooned alongside Natra's growth. For each of Wein's victories, their hearts grew increasingly bitter.

Several months ago, a chasm had formed between Wein and his vassals after

he arbitrarily decided to become the adopted son of a foreign leader. Convinced they could no longer allow their regent to do as he pleased, the vassals began plotting to curb his unchecked authority.

Of course, a tug-of-war between a ruler and his constituents wasn't uncommon. Falanya understood that much. However, the plot to install *her* on the throne made it a different story.

"To think anyone would try to push Wein aside and make me queen…"

The ringleader of this scheme was a man named Sirgis, whom Falanya had appointed herself. Although he recognized Wein's accomplishments, he also believed the prince threatened Natra's future progress. Therefore, Sirgis intended to put Falanya in charge. She and everyone else were aware that her abilities couldn't compare to Wein's, but Sirgis said the officials and citizens would support her and help move the nation forward.

"Argh! I can't take this!" Falanya exclaimed, pounding the pillow. "This is so typical of Wein. Everyone is already out to get him, yet he's run off again!"

The meeting with His Grace Ernesto of Eastern Levetia was supposed to be held in Natra, but the location had been switched to the Empire at the last minute. Although Wein's vassals strongly objected, Wein shot them down and headed east. He left behind instructions for Falanya and the royal officials to handle the government in his absence.

"He's practically helping Sirgis!"

Wein wandered abroad without listening to a word his vassals said.

Falanya listened to them as she tried to lead the nation.

It was clear as day who between them would win the officials' hearts.

Of course, Wein was still Natra's crown prince. The people adored him, and even his staff had faith in his brilliance. Those who earnestly supported his little sister's candidacy for the throne were few and far between.

Nonetheless…

"…"

Falanya understood that if she truly had no desire to rule, she had only to tell Wein. All involved parties, including Sirgis, would be duly sentenced. Falanya would be married off to some allied nation, and that would be the end of it. Then, Natra's rightful king would lead the people to a new golden age.

However, something Sirgis mentioned kept Falanya from going to her brother.

"Fwaah…" Falanya flopped back on the bed and yawned.

"Sounds like you've got it rough."

“You make it sound like you’re totally uninvolved!”

“I’m a bodyguard.”

“I know, but stillllll! Nghhh!”

Falanya glared at Nanaki with evident frustration. She was thankful for his consistent character, but it proved frustrating at times.

“Princess Falanya…”

There was a knock at the door.

“…It’s almost time for your usual meeting.”

The official’s voice made Falanya sit up. This meeting was something Wein would normally attend, but he was counting on his sister to act as his proxy.

Yuan had said that how Falanya overcame these trials and her actions thereafter were paramount. Was the princess ready for such challenges? Was it even right to try?

Falanya lacked an answer. She took a deep breath.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

The princess stepped forward to fulfill her duty.

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“Hrmm…”

Wein groaned atop a horse as he rode at the front of his delegation.

“Is something wrong, Your Highness?”

The question came from Raklum, Wein’s guard commander. The young military officer, appointed by Wein himself, was undyingly loyal to his liege.

“Oh, I was just thinking about how bright these rays are.”

As Wein adjusted his collar to air out his clothes, he stared up at the sky in annoyance. It was early summer. With winter long gone and spring on its way out, the sun grew harsher.

“One might say it’s a natural part of the season, but it’s also proof we left Natra some time ago.”

After departing Natra, which stood at the northernmost tip of the continent, the group began the journey southeast toward the Imperial Capital. The temperature naturally rose during their travel.

As for *why* the group headed for the capital, it was so Wein could meet with Ernesto, the Leader of Eastern Levetia.

Damn, that Lowa sure is a thorn in my side.

Ernesto was originally supposed to visit Natra, but the news of Lowellmina’s

assassination forced a change.

Even Wein had been shocked by this development, which was only natural since Lowellmina was both a friend and an ally. When reports of misinformation arrived while he was issuing orders to conduct a closer investigation, Wein was relieved. Nevertheless, he suspected the situation might spark a huge shift in the Empire, and he changed his tactics. To observe matters firsthand, the crown prince elected to visit the Empire under the pretext of meeting Ernesto.

Bardloche, Manfred, and Lowa. What will their next moves be?

Wein smirked as he imagined the vortex of complex intrigue building in the Empire. Not even that could get him to forget the unbearable heat, though.

"At times like these, I mourn the East's 'no carriage' tradition."

"They truly seem to regard royals and nobles as warriors," Raklum replied.

Such people were the nation's guardians, and it was their patriotic duty to fight in times of peril. The Eastern continent typically viewed blue bloods who preferred to ride in carriages as weak. The proud royals and aristocrats of the West, however, believed reckless public appearances to be in poor taste, making the carriage the preferred mode of travel. Culture took many forms.

Wein wasn't one to hide away in a carriage, but he was northern-born and sensitive to heat. His desire to get out of the sun was understandable.

"By the way, how are you holding up, Raklum?"

"Were this enough to best me, I would be unworthy to protect you, Your Highness."

"Dependable as always."

The faithful retainer thumped his chest proudly, and Wein grinned lightly.

"If you are feeling uncomfortable, Your Highness, then perhaps we should take a short rest?"

"There's no need. I can already see our stopover town."

No sooner had Wein answered than a familiar rider approached from ahead. It was Ninym.

"Your Highness, I've returned."

Ninym dismounted and respectfully bowed to Wein since they were in public.

"Good work. How'd it go, Ninym?"

"Our accommodations are prepared to receive us."

The Imperial Capital was several days' journey from Natra, making stops in towns along the way necessary. However, Wein's delegation of a dozen or so meant that some inns might lack sufficient room to shelter the entire party if it

arrived without warning. Ninym had ridden ahead to ensure everything was ready.

"However, Your Highness, there is one matter you should be aware of."

"Hm? Did something happen?"

Wein threw Ninym a concerned look. The girl moved closer to whisper in his ear.

And then…

"Hey there, it's been a while."

Wein smiled at Strang, who'd been waiting for him in town.

"Why don't we catch up, Wein?"

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Wein, Ninym, Strang, Glen, and Lowellmina.

The five were inseparable back in their academy days, but it wasn't like that at first. Wein and Ninym were always together, but Glen belonged to a different group. Lowellmina kept others at a distance to hide her true identity. And Strang—to be perfectly frank—was bullied by noble children.

A child of the conquered provinces versus the elite kids of the conquering Empire. This stark difference in social standing was more than enough fodder to foster discrimination among immature youngsters.

However, Strang's miserable luck turned around when his main tormentor suddenly dropped out of the military academy.

The reason was widely disputed, but Strang was sure the lack of a clear answer was meant to hide the truth, and thus he launched his own investigation. He felt thankful to be free of his oppressor and curious about the person who'd vanquished the foe when he couldn't. What kind of person could calmly and mercilessly eliminate a single target?

Finally, Strang learned of an incident from several days before his bully disappeared. Before his tormentor dropped out, he tried to violate a certain girl. Apparently, another boy had been present during the incident.

Feeling oddly uplifted, Strang asked that boy if he'd been the one to help him.

The boy, Wein, answered with a smile.

"Don't be stupid. The *real* fun starts once his family gets involved. You want

in?”

This guy was definitely the worst kind of trouble.

Strang nodded with a shudder.

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In the present, that troublesome guy and Ninym…

“Man, this tastes amazing.”

“Yes, I must agree.”

…were enjoying the fried snacks Strang brought as a souvenir.

“They fry wheat dough and butter, then drizzle it with lemon syrup, right?”

“It has a perfect blend of flavors.”

“This kind of thing was a delicacy back in our academy days.”

“Yes, I never imagined it would become commonly available.”

Strang took the opportunity to speak as Wein and Ninym admired the treats.

“The Empire’s spice cultivation has improved recently. Snacks like these are now sold at an affordable price.”

Wein, Ninym, and Strang were in one of the rooms Wein’s group had booked in advance. The three had arranged this meetup after Strang said there was something he wished to discuss.

“This nation’s technological advances never cease to amaze,” Ninym remarked.

“No kidding.” Wein nodded, then he turned his attention to Strang. “Honestly, I’m surprised you came out here to meet us, Strang.”

Strang was Wein and Ninym’s old classmate, but currently, he was a member of Manfred’s faction. Wein and Ninym were Lowellmina’s allies, making them Strang’s enemies.

“Shocking you is quite an accomplishment.”

“Really? I’m always being thrown for a loop.”

“He fell out of his chair after hearing about Lowa’s assassination.”

“Yeah, I never saw that one comin’.”

“I can understand why. I would have gone wide-eyed, too, if other people hadn’t been around.”

Strang offered a wry grin. Although Manfred’s faction had failed to find any definitive evidence despite multiple inquiries, they had concluded the assassination debacle was Lowellmina’s own handiwork. The princess had openly announced her claim to the throne, but who could have guessed she’d go

so far?

“Compared to what Lowa’s been up to, I admit this little get-together doesn’t seem too far-fetched. But I gather you haven’t come merely to see our lovely faces, have you?” Wein gave a provocative grin, and Strang confirmed the prince’s suspicions.

“Naturally. You might say the revelation I have for you will rival the recent excitement with Lowa.” Strang offered a single letter.

Wein accepted it and noticed the signature belonged to Manfred himself.

“Inside is a proposal of cooperation from Prince Manfred,” Strang explained. “Wein, will you cut ties with Lowa and join us?”

The room instantaneously tensed. Wein and Ninym studied Strang.

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“Of all the things to say…” Wein sensed the resolve in his friend’s every movement, and his mind raced as he spoke. “Join Manfred *now*? Not possible.”

Wein flat-out rejected Strang’s proposal, and no one would’ve found his refusal unreasonable. The crown prince and the Kingdom of Natra had, after a long series of events, formed a close alliance with Lowellmina. Conversely, he and Manfred made no secret of their animosity. Such history between the two dashed any chances of a partnership.

“You think so, too, right, Ninym?” Wein asked, bringing her into the conversation.

She nodded with a contemplative look from her spot beside the prince.

“Wein and Lowa’s relationship is firm in the public eye. Natra’s reputation will suffer if we cut ties. Besides, Lowa’s faction currently stands on top. I see no reason to switch sides.”

Ten out of ten people would have agreed with Ninym’s statement.

However…

“On the contrary, there *is* a reason.”

Strang’s smile revealed an unwavering confidence.

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“The people aren’t rising to action as fast as we hoped?”

“Correct. My apologies, Princess Lowellmina.”

Lowellmina let out a small groan at Fyshe’s report.

“I thought this would impede my brothers, but they dealt with the issue quickly.”

If Lowellmina could incite the citizens’ wrath and convince them of the need to raise an army, it would be a threat to the two remaining princes and undoubtedly cause trouble for them. However, thanks to her accomplishments thus far, the princess had expected a more delayed response.

“…Unfortunately, the princes’ interference may not suffice.”

“What do you mean?”

“The cause has not yet been determined, but it seems that anxiety over the stability and future of the Empire outpaces anger toward your rivals. According to the spies I have planted in each region, such concerns grow by the day.”

“Anxiety…”

Lowellmina didn’t find this the least bit odd. After all, Lowellmina’s continued success guaranteed a battle with the princes. Worries over that

outcome were entirely natural.

Nonetheless, she suspected there was more to it. After all, her scheme had accounted for those fears. This was beyond what Lowellmina intended. She must have overlooked some factor.

"Ah."

A thought struck Lowellmina like a bolt of lightning.

Yes, that had to be it. However, if so…

"That must mean…I've miscalculated."

Panic twisted her expression.

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"First of all, nobody asked for an Empress," Strang began. "The citizens of the Empire would have preferred one of the three princes on the throne. Still, the fact remains that Lowa came in and took center stage at a time when their three-way factional war offered no resolution. However—"

"The people initially hoped Lowa would represent their desire for a quick end to the civil war, right?" Wein concluded.

Strang nodded. "They wanted her to knock some sense into the three princes but never desired her as their ruler. Of course, Lowa knew this, acted accordingly, and earned the populace's trust. Meanwhile, the princes continued to fight and lost their cohesive power."

"And once First Prince Demetrio fell, Lowa announced her bid for the throne, just as she'd always hoped," Ninym added as she recalled the events leading to that moment. She and Wein had been instrumental in Demetrio's defeat.

"Exactly. The citizens accepted her because of their disappointment in the princes, and Lowa immediately continued down a path that led to her current position, one closer to the throne. But…" Strang paused. "Process of elimination has made Lowa the only option to the public."

"…"

Wein and Ninym both fell silent. Once the pair understood Strang's words couldn't be denied or dismissed, he continued.

"Most people resist change. No, perhaps I should say it's the inconvenience of change that they truly detest. Behind the outward excitement of fresh ventures and a new era lurk inevitable growing pains. I'm sure more than a few citizens feel that the current system is fine so long as there's food on the table."

Casting such feelings aside as mere complacency was too irresponsible. A

heart that desired stability and a predictable way of life wasn't weak in the slightest.

"If the Empire *did* crown an Empress, it would certainly be a groundbreaking moment lauded as momentous by future historians. Yet to those of us living in the present, the idea is nothing but a bother. So long as the princes act with decency, everyone would prefer to continue the tradition of a male Emperor."

"…However, that's not how things turned out," Wein said in a slow, deliberate tone. "Even if it's just because Lowellmina is their only option, there's a good chance Earthworld will know its first Empress. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, until recently. The failed assassination attempt has cast a shadow, though."

"What do you mean?"

"The incident won Lowa sympathy, and the princes' perceived cowardice stirred public outrage. But one belief looms even larger. This event proves to many that a woman can never be a leader."

"Hold on," Ninym cut in irritably. "That's just an irrational opinion."

"I completely agree," Strang replied with a smile. "Nonetheless, it is how the people feel. Lowa tried to rouse their ire by acting the innocent victim, but the weakness she displayed sowed a seed of doubt in their hearts. They're uncertain if someone so weak is fit to rule the Empire. It might sound harsh, but Lowa should have portrayed herself as a beautiful, strong, invincible, and flawless leader who would guide the Empire to victory in the new era."

Ninym groaned in frustration, but she understood Strang's point. Throughout its history, the Earthworld Empire had always been ruled by a man. There had never been an Empress. In the public eye, an Emperor was a safe, natural choice. Earthworld required enormous enthusiasm to discard such a tradition, and as Strang had pointed out, the passion for change was rapidly dimming.

"I get what you're saying," Wein said. "In other words, you want us to switch sides once Lowa loses because of the growing doubt?"

"Not at all. There is currently a seventy percent chance she will win," Strang answered flatly.

Wein and Ninym threw him a look that asked what kind of game he was playing.

"Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred have both made numerous mistakes. Despite concerns over a possible female ruler, Lowa is still a far better option."

"In that case, what reason does Natra have to switch sides?" Ninym questioned.

"That will come into play *after* Lowa wins," Strang replied.

Wein's expression immediately twisted into a faint grimace. Strang noticed this and pressed on.

"Lowa is a woman. That alone gave people enough reason to underestimate her, yet she chose to appear weak all the same. So what do you think will happen once she becomes the Empire's leader?"

"…It'll be the provinces' chance to seek independence, and the West will prepare to attack," Wein answered.

"Exactly. New, young rulers are typically looked down upon. Prince Miroslav of the Falcasso Kingdom had to deal with the same issue. However…" Strang took a moment. "Lowa is both a woman and a leader who will carry the weight of the Empire. Our power is mighty but still vulnerable to collapse. With all of this in mind, Lowa must make her political prowess known domestically and abroad the moment she takes the throne, regardless of her territorial ambitions."

"…And that's where Natra comes in?"

"I would expect so."

Wein groaned.

"What do you mean?" Ninym asked with a puzzled head tilt.

Strang faced her. "Defeating the Kingdom of Falcasso is Lowa's best chance to make a statement. She recently defeated her brothers, and striking down the now-illustrious Prince Miroslav would produce optimal results. Lowa would outshine the princes and vastly improve her military reputation by doing so."

"But she's out of luck," Wein said with a displeased look on his face. "If the Empire defeated Falcasso, the West would view it as a major threat. Plus, the West would put its full support behind Falcasso in its fight against the Empire. It'd be tough for the Empire after it's been exhausted from civil war."

"Breaking into the West via Mealtars would also be difficult. The merchant city sits literally in the middle of everything, after all. The moment the Empire sets foot in the West, the neighboring nations will gang up on us," Strang explained.

Ninym finally understood what Wein and Strang were getting at.

Falcasso was out of the question, and entering the West through central Mealtars was risky. Which meant the sole remaining target was…

"She intends to attack Natra?!" Ninym blurted out. "But we have an alliance with the Empire!"

"You are indeed allies, but you're neither a vassal state nor a province.

Therefore, the Empire can cut ties with you or likewise be cut off at any time. On top of that, Natra's crown prince is the continent's foremost opportunistic weasel."

"Hey."

"My apologies. He is a prince of unmatched impartiality who is considered dangerous by the West. Striking at this fool who gladly woos the West despite being an ally of the Empire is the obvious choice. And far from coming to Natra's aid, the West will applaud us."

"That's…"

Ninym tried to argue but ultimately fell silent. Strang's words clearly rang with truth.

"Of course, our two nations are still allies. Whatever the reason, a one-sided attack on Natra would harm the Empire's reputation. Normally, this would give rise to protests, but now there is slander involved."

"Slander?" Ninym questioned.

"Lowa is single. Suitors line up for her hand, but she brushes them all aside. This is mostly for political reasons, of course, but there are firmly rooted rumors that the princess has fallen for a certain opportunist."

"…"

Wein and Ninym stared up at the ceiling. Strang smiled at their expressions. "In the minds of the Empire's elite, Wein is an irksome love rival. It would be one thing if Lowa remained a mere princess, but the aristocracy would never allow the crown prince of a foreign nation to marry the Empress. I doubt anyone would protest Lowa's attack on Natra if doing so buried such misgivings."

How easy it would have been to bluntly reject such a notion as ridiculous and move on. Yet the more Wein listened, the more plausible Strang's prediction became.

What terrible twist of fate was this?

Lowa had entered the political sphere in hopes of becoming Empress.

Wein had formed close ties with the potential monarch.

How could he have known their invaluable connection might lead to such a blood-soaked destiny?

"At this rate, Lowa will take control of the Empire, and Natra will have a crisis on its hands. I apologize for being so long-winded, but this is why you should cut ties with Lowa." Strang spoke brazenly in the face of Wein and Ninym's misery. "What will you do? Have you decided to take our potential collaboration more seriously?"

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Just as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, the group decided to end their conversation for the day.

"It was great to see you after so long," Strang told Ninym, who came to see him off as he returned to his own lodgings. The man's confident expression was undoubtedly due to his friends' reactions during the earlier talk.

"I wish I could say we felt the same."

"Does it bother you so much that I've suggested you break your alliance with Lowa? You've always been fond of her, Ninym."

"…That's not true," Ninym objected, although her voice was weak. Perhaps such a response was natural when it concerned a close female friend.

"Well, don't be too upset. It's not like I hate Lowa. And I'm sure Glen feels the same way. But I won't stand a chance in the main battle if I don't win this preliminary round."

Ninym read between the lines and understood Strang meant a showdown with Wein.

"As usual, you both see Wein as competition."

She let out a little sigh. This had been going on since their academy days. Strang and Glen recognized Wein's talent and role as the leader of their group of five, but they also stubbornly refused to be beaten. That feeling hadn't diminished after graduation and going their separate ways. Ninym didn't know whether to be annoyed or impressed.

While she thought on this…

"What about you, Ninym?"

"Huh?"

It took her mind a moment to process the unexpected question.

"Haven't you ever thought about challenging Wein?"

"…Never. I have absolutely no interest in the idea."

Despite her reply, silence fell between the two. Strang pressed no further, though, instead offering an easygoing smile.

"Well, if I'm ever going to settle my rivalry with Wein, then I might as well take advantage of current events. I can play along for a while longer," he said before waving goodbye.

Now alone, Ninym quietly mumbled "Me against Wein…"

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“Sooo what now?” Wein muttered as he squirmed on the sofa after Strang had left.

“…”

“Hm? What’s up, Ninym?”

“It’s nothing. More importantly, we’ll likely suffer if Lowa wins this war.” She and Wein hadn’t expected this at all. And now that they knew, they couldn’t ignore the possibility. “Strang only gave his opinion on the future… What do you think, Wein?”

“I’d say there’s a good chance he’s right.”

The path to Empress was treacherous and steep, but the aftermath promised to be even worse. Moreover, if the Empire was already at its limit, regardless of whether that same fatigue was responsible for creating an opportunity for a female monarch in the first place, then the challenges ahead would be all the more rigorous. If Lowellmina needed to step on an ally to continue down her chosen path, the princess would not hesitate to do so, regardless of personal feelings.

“Well, I don’t think Lowa was ever really *against* attacking us to begin with,” Wein remarked.

“She’s probably thrilled to have an excuse,” Ninym added.

Both could vividly picture an ecstatic Lowellmina shouting, *I can punch Wein? Hooray!*

“Be that as it may, I don’t think we can fully trust Manfred’s faction either,” Ninym said.

“Agreed. Manfred likely believes he needs to act tough to avoid mockery.”

An army led by Falcasso’s Prince Miroslav recently dealt a major blow to Manfred’s and Bardloche’s forces. The memory was still fresh in the public’s memory. Both princes had naturally lost a great deal of support.

“Well, Strang said Manfred plans to strike Falcasso once he regains power, but…”

Falcasso was the perfect opportunity for Manfred to clear his past embarrassment. And unlike Lowellmina, Manfred’s faction had originally taken the provinces and could exert control over them.

Strang claimed that whoever seized rule would have to suppress the provinces’ wild behavior and restore the Empire to its former strength. Then they would need to prepare for the long-awaited battle with Falcasso and the West.

“He said that, on top of fighting Falcasso, it’s politically crucial for the

Empire to maintain ties with Natra since we control the northern highways. It makes a lot of sense," Wein mused.

"But how much can we actually trust him?"

Ninym remained skeptical. Considering the events thus far, her stance was reasonable, but her friendship with Lowellmina undoubtedly played a role as well. Wein offered her a dry grin.

"Well, I'm sure the other side has realized we won't just take their word at face value. That's why they made that offer."

"That nothing is required of us makes it all the more suspicious," Ninym remarked.

How can Manfred's faction expect us to cooperate? Wein wondered.

As Ninym said, Strang hadn't made a single demand. Wein only had to meet with the Leader of Eastern Levetia, Ernesto, and return to Natra as planned.

"If I've got this right, the real goal is to lock a major foreign player like me out of the Empire."

As Strang himself admitted, Lowellmina was the frontrunner for taking control of the Empire. Disrupting the status quo demanded serious effort, but since Wein had the skill to achieve victory on his own, Strang wished to keep him at arm's length rather than form an alliance. Nonetheless, the Crown Prince of Natra wasn't yet sure how to single-handedly accomplish this goal.

"So," Ninym began, bringing her face close to his, "what will you do, Wein?"

"Good question…"

If Wein wanted to support Lowellmina, his best bet was to maintain close contact with the princess and find a position that would allow him to observe the situation as it unfolded. Conversely, if he hoped to ally with Manfred, the wisest course of action was to hurry home after the meeting with Ernesto.

Perhaps the biggest annoyance was the fact that, for Wein, this conference was nothing more than a pretext to visit the Empire. Even if he decided to return home quickly, he didn't owe Lowellmina an explanation. If anything, Wein's swift exit would be the easiest way to make Manfred feel indebted, which seemed to be Strang's aim.

He's still a wily, four-eyed sneak, Wein thought.

"Honestly, it's a conundrum. Weighing Lowa and Manfred on a scale to figure out who has the better odds should be the best way to decide. However, there are a few details I can't get over."

"And those are…?" Ninym asked with a slight tilt of her head.

“Pardon me!” a flustered civil servant cried as he flew into the room. “We’ve detected movement in the Empire! Second Prince Bardloche has assembled an army!”

Ninym’s eyes shot wide with shock, while Wein smirked.

“Looks like the final piece has made his move.”

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"Hurry! We must reach Prince Manfred immediately!"

Strang gripped the reins of his horse tightly and called to his subordinates, who rode behind him.

"Sir Strang! The horses are at their limit!"

"We'll switch them for fresh ones along the way! Time is of the essence!"

Strang was confident about his meeting with Wein and had therefore assumed he'd be able to make his move. However, he was forced to switch strategies once reports of Bardloche's gathered forces rolled in.

To think he'd act this fast…!

Reluctantly, Strang opted to pursue his minimum goal. He postponed the meeting and raced back to Manfred.

How much will the situation change during the time it takes for me to arrive?

Strang urged his steed onward as he fought back irritation.

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"There aren't nearly enough horses. Where can we get more?"

"We have connections, but regarding quality…"

"There's no time to be picky. We need numbers."

"Speaking of which, we can't forget the foot soldiers. Gather as many as possible."

Bardloche's top brass had gathered in a meeting room to debate before the Second Prince. They were, to put it succinctly, eager and excited. The gloomy atmosphere brought on by their faction's weakness had hovered over them for a while, but it had since vanished without a trace. That much was to be expected, however, for Bardloche's forces would soon enter the final battle.

"…"

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The Second Prince sat quietly. Past failures had chipped at his pride, but his dignified aura remained intact, lending him an air of invincibility.

"Prince Bardloche, we have safely procured the items you requested."

A woman named Ibis approached him from the shadows. She was a merchant by trade, but in truth, she worked for Caldmellia, a powerful authority within the Teachings of Levetia.

"When will they arrive?"

"I believe everything will be ready when our soldiers are assembled."

Ibis's tone was polite, yet she harbored no respect for Bardloche. To her, the prince was only a pawn. Bardloche knew this and scoffed.

"Not that it matters. After all, you're the one who instigated this showdown."

This wasn't the first time Bardloche's faction had worked with Caldmellia's subordinate, so he readily accepted Ibis despite her wicked intentions.

"I wouldn't dare commit such an outrageous act," she replied with a civil smile. "I merely proposed a strategy that would allow Your Highness the greatest chance of victory."

Ibis had appeared several days ago and proclaimed, *"Now is an opportune moment to step in and settle matters."*

According to Ibis, Bardloche's military strength surpassed every other faction's. The Second Prince trailed behind only because his methods were too chivalrous.

"You are free to set the approval of the people aside. Remove all who stand in your way through armed force, and once Your Highness is the only choice for Emperor, they will naturally submit. While you stand here wavering over whether to draw your sword, the other players use that time to their advantage," she'd said.

It was to be a quick, decisive battle. The situation wouldn't improve no matter how long Bardloche deliberated. Thus, he would rise to action, take down Lowellmina in the capital, then finish Manfred immediately afterward. Ibis would offer support every step of the way; such was the deal she had proposed.

It was an excessively violent option, but Bardloche's top leaders accepted it with astonishingly little resistance. After the failed assassination, they suspected their more passive strategies were no longer viable. Everyone knew action was necessary.

The West's support, under the guise of merchant aid, was a lifesaver. Its motives for aiding Bardloche's faction remained a complete mystery, but the offer was sincere, and the prince saw no reason to question it. With this

newfound help, Bardloche's soldiers made ready for the final conflict.

"According to my subordinates, our sudden action has flustered Princess Lowellmina's and Prince Manfred's forces. We have the chance to strike first."

"I hope you're right."

Bardloche was certain that seizing the initiative was a key factor. He would keep a tight grip on it and topple his two opponents. Faltering now would guarantee failure.

I know I'm at a disadvantage…but victory will still be mine!

Resolve filled the prince from head to toe as he awaited the coming battle.

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Glen Markham's family line had long been known for its military prowess. This didn't change the fact that he and his kin were still low-ranking nobles. Their achievements were small when set against the greater tapestry of history. Nevertheless, Glen's eyes had sparkled as a child when his parents spoke of their modest victories, and he was quite proud of his lineage. Perhaps it was unavoidable that Glen desired to take up the blade as well. He had the aptitude for it and learned true swordsmanship in the military academy.

But then, Glen hit a wall.

His progress stalled after mastering the art. No other swordsmen in the academy could spar against him, and his motivation plummeted.

More importantly, Glen plateaued because those around him—his parents, teachers, and friends—allowed it to happen.

He knew something had to be done; otherwise, he'd slowly decline and fall deeper into complacency. The man required a stricter environment.

That was when Glen met Wein and the others.

The outrageous arrogance shook him. The fearsome, quick wit that got away with everything. The sheer strength of it. Glen had never encountered such people, and Wein stood out most of all.

He'd heard rumors about a prominent trio, but upon meeting them, he realized there was obviously more to the three than met the eye. They provided the exact environment Glen had been hoping for.

Still, it hadn't been without issues. Glen had foreseen a future where his newfound friendship caused his inner confidence and pride to crumble. Nevertheless, he'd known he needed to take that first step forward.

"Can I talk with you for a moment?"

Steeling himself, the young Glen had approached the three…

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"…Phew."

In the present, Glen Markham stood in a corner of the military grounds within Bardloche's domain. Judging by the toned muscles of his exposed upper body and sweaty appearance as he cooled off in the fresh air, the man was nothing less than a robust warrior. Plenty of other soldiers trained around him, and the air was alive with endless shouts from all directions.

"Can we at least call them real soldiers now…?" Glen muttered as he observed the troops.

Bardloche's faction had expanded its army in preparation for the decisive battle. Quality among the newcomers varied, and most were either inexperienced or weak. It was, therefore, the duty of commanding officers like Glen to make them more capable before the big day, even if only by the slightest margin. Bardloche's fate rested in his military. Neglecting to improve these soldiers would see the war effort crumble from the inside out. Although Glen considered himself inexperienced, he couldn't refuse an order to prepare the troops.

How much pressure will this put on them?

As a servant approached, Glen's thoughts turned to his two troublesome friends.

"Captain Glen, you have a visitor."

"A visitor? For me?"

"Yes, someone named Lianne is currently in the manor reception room."

"…!"

Glen's cheeks flushed, an exceptional rarity. Unable to contain himself, he prepared to dash off but, remembering his appearance, he changed direction. Glen grabbed a bucket from a nearby well, poured water over his head, and made for the barracks without bothering to dry.

He hurried into his private officer's quarters, wiped himself down with a cloth, and took out a formal outfit. After quickly donning the clothes, Glen examined himself in a mirror for a second. Deciding he would suffice, he made his way to the manor beside the barracks.

Glen stood in front of the door to the reception room and took one small breath. He gave the door a light knock before opening it.

"I'm sorry for the wait, Lianne!"

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“Sir Glen.”

The woman’s delicate features were the very picture of a sheltered maiden, or perhaps a doll. However, the moment she laid eyes on Glen, she lit up, making her unmistakably human.

“You haven’t kept me waiting at all. Rather, I apologize for suddenly imposing on you like this.”

“How could I ever consider a visit from my fiancée an inconvenience?”

Glen’s family belonged to the lowest class of nobility in the Empire, and arranged marriages were a common political strategy among the aristocracy. Glen and Lianne were a typical example of this. Lianne’s and Glen’s families had decided the two would wed. Unsurprisingly, such unions often disregarded romantic feelings, but…

“Sir Glen, your hair is damp.”

“Ah, sorry. I was training.”

Lianne took out a handkerchief and gently patted Glen’s hair, and the man was only too happy to allow it. If the pair’s expressions were any indication, they didn’t object to their betrothal in the least.

“So, Lianne, what brings you here today?”

The military training ground was purely a male sphere and no place for a lady like Lianne. However, Glen always welcomed a visit from his fiancée.

“Actually, I heard rumors there’s to be a large-scale battle.”

Glen wasn’t surprised. Although the anticipated clash had not been announced to the public, Bardloche’s faction was gathering as many soldiers and resources as possible. Something like that couldn’t go undetected. Anyone with the slightest intelligence could deduce that something big was about to happen.

“I’m sorry for not telling you. As you’ve heard, Prince Bardloche will sortie his forces in a decisive battle against Prince Manfred and Princess Lowellmina. I will take part as well.”

“That’s…” Lianne trailed off. She was undoubtedly aware of the troubles that faced Bardloche’s faction. An omen of failure loomed in place of anticipated victory.

“The location hasn’t been determined yet, but the land surrounding the Imperial Capital will likely become a battlefield. You should evacuate to the countryside as soon as possible. It would help put my mind at ease.”

Glen gave Lianne a rare smile to dispel her fears as best he could. Unsurprisingly, his attempt appeared to be in vain.

“…I apologize for involving you in my family’s circumstances, Sir Glen,”

Lianne muttered solemnly.

The meaning of her words was clear. Lianne belonged to a family of low-ranking aristocrats, and she had relatives among Bardloche's top leaders. Her family and her fiancé's had no choice but to follow Bardloche's decisions.

However, the Second Prince's faction was presently waning, and Lianne's sense of obligation had her trapped on a sinking ship.

"That's not true, Lianne." Glen gripped her hand as he gently explained himself. "I would likely have joined Prince Bardloche regardless of your family's situation."

"But…why?" she asked.

Her fiancé fell silent for a few moments. He wasn't searching for an answer but instead for the right words. "I have friends who serve under Princess Lowellmina and Prince Manfred, respectively."

"Friends?" she repeated with a tilt of the head. "In that case, shouldn't you be joining one of—"

"You'd normally be right. However, we're a bit different," Glen explained, nostalgia entering his voice. "We've walked the same path, held each other's hands, and stood side by side. There is no denying our friendship. However, we all wonder who would win if we came to blows."

"…"

"We want to prove who is superior as well as test our limits. Thus, our best bet is to challenge those we respect, those who mutually recognize our strength. It might sound presumptuous, but that's why I cannot say the three of us have been thrown into a civil war. In reality, we're using it."

Lianne blinked in astonishment, and Glen couldn't blame her. After all, such impulsive behavior was undoubtedly difficult to comprehend. Especially since he was putting his life on the line.

"Sir Glen, do you intend to battle your two friends and win?"

"That's right. However, the challenge won't end there," he said. "One of my old friends is a cut above the rest. He was outstanding even back in the old days, but he's already shown the world his true talent in this era of unrest… Once the Empire is done fighting itself, I'll take him on."

Perhaps, Glen thought. *We've always wanted his—Wein's—approval.*

Glen was well acquainted with the frustration. Wein had been watching from afar since the group's academy days. Lowellmina and the others had surely realized as well that, while he was certainly their friend, Wein never once demonstrated a need for camaraderie.

Glen resented him. It was so humiliating. Whenever he and Wein were together, he wanted to grab the prince by the collar and shout, *Notice me!*

This civil unrest was the perfect opportunity. Once the Empire crowned a new ruler, it wouldn't be long before the nation went to war with Natra. Glen's victory over the Third Prince and Second Princess would prove that he had the skill to challenge the dragon.

"…I'm not quite sure what you mean, Sir Glen."

Lianne's voice was timid. "However, I can tell how much those friends mean to you. I must admit that I'm quite jealous."

Glen chuckled quietly at the confession. "Don't worry. They always have and always will be friends and nothing more. You're my only love, Lianne."

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“Really? Don’t you have any female acquaintances?”

“Ah… Well, I do, but…”

“…”

Liane poked Glen’s chest standoffishly. As he contemplated a way to allay her uncomfortable protest, a knock came at the door.

“Pardon me, Captain Glen. It is almost time for your conference.”

“Understood. I’ll be there in a minute,” he answered.

After dismissing his subordinate, Glen turned back to Lianne. “I’m afraid he’s right. I wish we could talk longer, but—”

“No, your feelings are enough.” Lianne squeezed Glen’s hand. “I realize there’s not much I can do, but I will earnestly pray for your victory.”

Glen smiled and squeezed her hand back.

“Yes, leave everything to me.”

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“This isn’t good at all,” Lowellmina mumbled through a mouthful of pancakes topped with a mound of whipped cream.

“Is the food not to your liking?” Fyshe asked.

“No, *this* is absolutely delicious. I feel invigorated,” Lowellmina said with a satisfied nod between bites. “Yes, sweets are truly nature’s nectar. This manor is certainly quite comfortable, but the menu is peculiar.”

Imperial Princess Lowellmina was currently a guest in Keskinel’s manor. Needless to say, it was his duty as Prime Minister of the Empire to show the utmost hospitality. However, Lowellmina and Keskinel’s meals together almost always included insects or a whole roast of some unfamiliar beast. He insisted each was a traditional dish from lands annexed by the Empire and claimed to dine on them regularly to understand those cultures better.

You dumb liar. You’re definitely just trying to annoy me. That’s what Lowellmina thought at first, but the way Keskinel enjoyed each dish with gusto seemed to verify his sincerity. In other words, the variety of bizarre cuisine was a heartfelt display of hospitality. The princess was hardly appreciative, however.

“If I continue to eat such fare, my stomach will turn inside out. My apologies to Keskinel, but for now, I shall satiate myself with sweets,” Lowellmina declared as she stuffed her cheeks with more pancake.

“Your Highness, I thought I should mention that you have not left the

mansion in quite a while," Fyshe remarked quietly.

"Yes, what of it?"

"And you have been eating a few too many sweets…"

"…"

Lowellmina lightly poked her stomach. It jiggled.

"Y-Your Highness! I was merely suggesting that perhaps meals are not our biggest concern!"

As Fyshe hurriedly tried to skirt the topic, Lowellmina looked up from her stomach as though nothing had happened.

"The current situation is obviously our chief priority… Fyshe, how are the enemy's numbers?"

"To be honest, they're rising quickly," she replied tensely while gathering documents. "I believe Bardloche's army totals just shy of ten thousand. We, on the other hand, have yet to reach five thousand."

"I see. This isn't looking good at all."

Bardloche's forces primarily consisted of the Empire's most elite soldiers, while Lowellmina's troops were mostly weak and inexperienced. If he launched a direct attack, her fighters would be trampled in an instant.

"I meant to stoke the will of the people, but forcing Bardloche's hand was a terrible misstep…" Lowellmina groaned. Admitting her error now did no good. The situation had come to a crossroads.

"There are also those among our numbers, especially the conservatives who led Prince Demetrio's former faction, who are watching and waiting to see how the winds of fortune blow," Fyshe said. "Of course, we could gather more soldiers if we had more time. As to whether Bardloche's forces will wait that long…"

For the peace-loving Lowellmina to take up arms, she needed the people's support. Unfortunately, they hadn't rallied behind her as much as the princess had hoped, and Bardloche's forces were already making their move. This development naturally made Lowellmina's side uneasy.

I thought that brother of mine would hesitate a bit more, but…

Bardloche was a boar of a warrior but also surprisingly cautious. It was a weakness Lowellmina and Manfred plotted to use to their advantages. Yet this time, he'd been more decisive than expected.

According to reports from our subordinates, resources are flowing in from the West. Someone over there must be helping him.

At the current pace, Bardloche's troops would attack the Imperial Capital

before Lowellmina's had a chance to assemble. Furthermore, the capital's focus on authority and commerce meant it possessed minimal security. Even if Lowellmina concentrated solely on defense, it wouldn't be nearly enough.

"Your Highness, at this rate…"

"I know… Fyshe, where is Wein's delegation now?"

"It should be approaching the northern shore of Veijyu Lake… However, given the current predicament, the group will likely slow its pace and reschedule the meeting with Eastern Levetia's Leader."

"In that case, please find the delegation as soon as possible. We'll request reinforcements from Natra," Lowellmina said.

Fyshe frowned. "Reinforcements? But geographically…"

"They won't make it in time. But if Natra announces its plans to send help, it will inspire our soldiers and boost our numbers. Wein isn't likely to hand over aid for free, so please use your best judgment. Time is of the essence."

"Understood. I will depart immediately."

Fyshe bowed, then promptly turned on her heel and left. Afterward, Lowellmina closed her eyes.

We still have a chance at victory…which is why I'm concerned about Manfred.

Lowellmina didn't know what Strang might try. However, that crafty four-eyes was definitely up to *something*. Would she withstand the onslaught or be swallowed by it? The princess fell into deeper contemplation.

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When Strang returned to Manfred's manor, he was greeted by chaos that rivaled a battlefield.

"Prince Manfred!"

"Ah. You're back, Strang."

Strang pushed through the bustling crowd to reach the Third Prince. Fatigue showed plainly on Manfred's face.

"How is the situation?" he asked bluntly. Strang dropped his usual etiquette, for there was no time. The prince handed over a set of documents and proceeded to explain.

"We've received word that Bardloche is raising an army, and we're presently gathering our soldiers, too. However, our faction is largely formed of provincial leaders. Assembling troops from each region will take a while." Manfred sighed.

“You predicted Bardloche would be slow to act…but it looks like you were off the mark, Strang.”

“My apologies.” Strang’s strategy had presumed the Second Prince would use discretion. He’d reported as much to his master, so a bit of chiding was deserved. “However, we are not yet beaten.”

Despite this setback, Manfred’s faction could still recover. In fact, if Strang’s current scheme played out as anticipated, victory would be assured.

“My envoy visit with Prince Wein proved invaluable. How did you fare, Your Highness?”

“We’ve managed to reach an understanding. The details will be announced shortly.”

“Excellent,” Strang replied. “Now Wein is *trapped on all sides*.”

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“Regrettably, Natra can’t send reinforcements,” Wein explained with a grimace as Fyshe sat in wide-eyed shock across from him. He had no choice but to refuse.

You got me good, Strang.…

Wein imagined his friend had to be grinning ferociously.

And so the three snakes intertwined as they rapidly slithered toward a single peak. Each hungered for victory and eyed the prize greedily, but only one could reach the top. And sure enough, the serpent to emerge triumphant was…

Although Yuan was a follower of Eastern Levetia and an elite cardinal, the unexpected upheaval in recent days was something he had hoped was a practical joke.

The issue was poor timing. A top-level meeting between the larger-than-life Crown Prince Wein of Natra and His Grace Ernesto of Eastern Levetia, in the Empire no less, would allow Eastern Levetia's influence to soar. Certain of this, Yuan had done everything in his power to bring both sides to the negotiation table. Yet despite his initial success, Wein then suggested they meet in Natra. This was a result of Yuan's own inadequacies and a call for self-reflection.

However, the events that followed could only be described as astounding.

First, there was Lowellmina's supposed assassination. Yuan had been dumbfounded by the news. He knew the princess's popularity within the Empire was practically tangible. Yuan himself was secretly fond of her. What was to become of the Empire with her gone? A violent thunderstorm loomed over its future.

Thus Yuan was relieved when reports of misinformation arrived. Plus, Prince Wein had taken the situation seriously and agreed to meet in the Empire so he could observe its state of affairs. It was an unexpected windfall.

However, that was when Yuan's luck ran out.

Princess Lowellmina and Prime Minister Keskinel were close allies, the outraged citizens suspected either Manfred or Bardloche had ordered the assassination, and the princes' recent movements were worrisome. The Empire's situation was deteriorating rapidly, and since he was the conference's coordinator, Yuan's work was never done.

If—if only we could postpone it…!

However, Yuan was the one who'd invited the foreign prince in the first place. Any proposed delay would reflect poorly on him, and Wein would see

through any attempt to indirectly get him to do the same. Yuan racked his brain over what to do about the inevitable arrival of the Natra delegation.

As matters stood, he had no choice but to get through the conference as fast as possible and send Wein's delegation back to Natra.

That was the plan, but…

"I never imagined it would come to this."

Reports of Bardloche's army were the last thing on Yuan's mind.

They were hardly inconsequential, but a greater issue overshadowed them.

"I suppose we won't be able to remain uninvolved for much longer," Yuan said in a displeased tone. He glanced down at the letter in his hand.

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"Wh-why, Your Highness?!"

Fyshe, who'd finally caught up to Wein's delegation in a town north of Veijyu Lake, insisted on an audience and requested Natra's aid. However, Wein said his nation would not provide reinforcements.

"If your concerns are financial, we will cover the cost! In fact, you don't have to send a single unit! You only need to announce that Natra's military is assisting Princess Lowellmina," she stated firmly.

"Like I said, I can't." Wein's refusal cut like a knife. "See for yourself. This just arrived from Eastern Levetia."

Wein held out a missive. Fyshe read the contents, then reeled.

"…Eastern Levetia has denounced Prince Bardloche?!"

Second Prince Bardloche, despite his position in the Imperial Family, was in contact with Levetia to the West and intended to become Emperor with its aid. His success guaranteed he would become a puppet of the West. Eastern Levetia's followers and the citizens of the Empire refused to accept this. The censure itself was written in the name of Eastern Levetia.

"I imagine you missed the news in your rush to get here," Wein said.

"Yes, it is as you say… But how can this be…?" Fyshe couldn't believe it, and her thoughts swirled. Eastern Levetia had always kept a fixed distance from the Empire and from worldly authorities as a whole. In return, the Empire respected those boundaries and made no attempt to bridge the gap. Even if one side ran into trouble, it was an unwritten rule that the other think very carefully before interfering. However, Bardloche had tossed that tradition out the window.

“Your shock is understandable, but any criticism against Prince Bardloche doesn’t matter now. Our real problem is that Levetia and Eastern Levetia have acted on their own,” Wein stated. “Prince Bardloche will be denounced as a traitor for siding with Levetia in the West. As representatives of Eastern Levetia, Prince Manfred and Princess Lowellmina will try to subdue him… Now, what do you think will happen if Natra decides to send Princess Lowellmina reinforcements?”

Fyshe shuddered. She finally understood what would happen if Wein granted Lowellmina aid. “…In all likelihood, society would see the move as an alliance between Natra and Eastern Levetia and an attack on Levetia.”

Wein nodded. “Right. And geographically speaking, our nation survives by striking a careful balance between the East and the West. I can’t do anything to slight Levetia.”

“…!”

Fyshe’s jaw tightened.

The battle for Imperial succession began as in-fighting among the late Emperor’s children, but it had since become a religious war by proxy. Fyshe had no choice but to accept Natra’s refusal, lest the West gain a reason to invade and wreak havoc. Such a development would be detrimental to Natra and the Empire.

“I realize you’ve come all this way, but unfortunately, my hands are tied, Lady Blundell.”

A disappointed Fyshe could only nod.

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“…Well, that was nothing short of brilliant,” Wein said with a wry smile after Fyshe had left the room in a downtrodden stupor. “Can’t say I ever thought he’d get Eastern Levetia involved.”

“This must have been Strang’s plan when he met with you.”

“No kidding. He obviously wants me removed from the conflict.”

Wein threw the uneasy Ninym a side glance, then returned his attention to the letter in his hand.

The largest religion in the East had condemned a prince. Needless to say, it wasn’t a half-hearted decision. Eastern Levetia’s followers weren’t a group of drunks bashing politicians from one corner of town. If Bardloche’s faction won, it would never forgive Eastern Levetia. The religious organization had

undoubtedly taken severe measures to stop the prince in his tracks.

"Strang's scheme must go a little something like this."

Wein proceeded to explain each step.

"First, he explained how Lowa's rule could threaten Natra and tried to discourage me from supporting her," he said.

Ninym chimed in. "He also requested nothing from Natra and actively avoided antagonizing us."

"He must have also convinced Eastern Levetia that Bardloche is an enemy of the Empire."

"If all goes well, he'll prevent Natra from interfering and greatly demoralize Bardloche's army… His meticulousness is truly maddening," Ninym said with a sigh.

Wein shrugged. "He got me good. I never thought Strang would drive me this far into a corner."

"But how did Manfred's forces persuade Eastern Levetia to act? Bardloche's ties with the West must be significant for Eastern Levetia to denounce him directly."

"That's a good point… Eastern Levetia isn't the Empire's official religion, and its authority is pretty limited. I've heard the autonomous provinces handle most of the proselytizing. In that case, if I had to guess…"

"Most powerful members of Manfred's faction are major provincial figures… They must have taken every believer hostage."

"Of course, that also means Manfred and his gang have gathered enough evidence to justify condemning Bardloche."

Meticulousness. Yes, as Ninym had said, it was a well-organized scheme.

Not everything had gone according to plan, though. Between the botched assassination attempt, Wein's visit to the Empire, and Bardloche's quick maneuvers, there had been plenty of bumps along the way. Still, Manfred's forces had stayed the course and brilliantly seized the initiative.

"The main issue now is that Bardloche has become the key to the throne."

Thanks to her failed "assassination," Lowellmina had inadvertently projected an image of weakness. However, Bardloche's and Manfred's mistakes had outstripped hers, and the populace would continue to support the frail princess regardless.

"Manfred doesn't have enough public support to win by standard means, but now there's an obvious villain," Ninym mused.

"Right. The people were already outraged by the assassination reports, and

now there's a scandal afoot. If Bardloche isn't careful, his faction will be blamed for all the suffering this war has inflicted. Lowa and Manfred will surely do their best to push that narrative. If they succeed, past wins or losses will mean nothing because everyone will be calling for Bardloche's head."

Outstanding achievements could paint over past mistakes. Coupled with the established tradition of male succession that conservatives favored, Manfred would have the advantage if he defeated Bardloche. Citizens would laud the prince and pin their hopes on him as the next Emperor.

"But, Wein…"

"Right," he answered with a nod. "This isn't a bad deal for Lowa either."

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I can do this…!

As soon as Lowellmina learned that Eastern Levetia had castigated Bardloche, she spied a chance at victory.

Morale in Bardloche's faction and his influx of soldiers are sure to plummet! The outraged citizens will come flocking to my side, too! I'll even have fodder to sway the opportunists in my party!

Of course, the involvement of both sects of the Levetia faith meant Natra couldn't move a muscle. Lowellmina knew this before Fyshe returned with Wein's answer, but she also saw potential benefit in this. Strang was definitely keeping an eye on Lowellmina's advantages, yet he still took action to keep Wein a bystander.

That crafty four-eyes still considers Wein more of a threat than me.

This didn't upset Lowellmina. In fact, it was a reasonable conclusion. Nonetheless, she felt Strang had made two mistakes.

First, he seemingly felt confident he could win without Wein. And second, he'd assumed he could incite Bardloche by carefully cornering him.

At any rate, I won't miss a single step from here on out.

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"Bardloche obviously won't back down now either."

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"Time to move out."

Soon after his unexpected censure, Bardloche addressed his agitated faction.

"That damn Manfred's schemes have got us against a wall. Any time we waste will give our opponents time to bolster their forces. We've got no choice but to take down Lowellmina and Manfred with what we have," Bardloche announced. "I've planned to ignore the people's will and resort to firepower from day one. I couldn't care less if I'm labeled a traitor. Once I'm Emperor, I'll blot out my disgrace with military might. Follow me only if you can accept this."

Everyone assembled agreed quickly.

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"So what will you do, Wein?"

"Hmm." He mulled over Ninym's question for a moment. "Meeting Ernesto is the most logical step… But in light of the situation, we should probably postpone that and make a hasty retreat."

"We're just north of Veijyu Lake, but the Imperial Capital isn't far to the south. I doubt the battle will reach this far, but the confusion and chaos certainly could."

"Our delegation doesn't have many fighters, and any attempt to summon Nara's soldiers would present physical and political challenges."

"In that case—"

"Still, it's no fun to turn tail and hide," Wein declared with a bold smile. "Honestly, being outplayed kinda annoys me."

Ninym raised an eyebrow. "Do we even have a realistic way to fight back?"

"Sure we do," Wein replied without skipping a beat. "Fyshe is still in the area, right? Call her for me right away. And prepare a letter, too. Let's astound these people with a dash of mischief."

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"I suppose everything has come together…" Keskinel muttered while reviewing the situation via compiled unit reports.

Bardloche had steeled himself after being backed into a corner.

Lowellmina was preparing to meet him head-on.

Manfred hoped to use the other two to his advantage.

And Wein appeared to be interfering surreptitiously.

"The time has finally come."

Keskinel sought a confident Emperor, a desire born from a history book he

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read as a child. It chronicled the life of the Empire's first monarch, starting with the nation of Nalthia and its powerful neighbors.

A lackluster military, enemy commanders issuing challenges at every turn, circling schemes, and an Emperor who beat the odds to achieve great success. The account touched Keskinel's heart, and he was eternally grateful to be a child of the Earthworld Empire. Leading Earthworld to further greatness was his patriotic duty. Such was the destiny of every citizen of the Empire.

Thus, Keskinel had remained neutral and purposefully pitted the Imperial children against one another. He paid no mind to the blood spilled. Civilian deaths and foreign threats were of no consequence. Everything was in service of his goal, and the Prime Minister removed any element that might inhibit the birth of a glorious Emperor.

Now at last, Keskinel's efforts would bear fruit.

"Three snakes race toward the summit. A dragon stirs in the north. How will this play out?"

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Bardloche was the first of the three siblings to take action, and his hodgepodge army marched from his domain. His forces totaled around ten thousand. Bardloche had anticipated at least double that, yet he'd reached only the halfway mark, severely limiting his resources. However, his soldiers possessed tremendous confidence. It was a desperate resolve the other two factions couldn't match.

Bardloche's forces marched for the Imperial Capital of Grantsrale, where Lowellmina had taken residence.

At least, that's what one might have assumed.

"We'll take the old capital of Nalthia."

Nalthia sat north of Grantsrale, situated along the southern shore of Veijyu Lake. It was the land of the Empire's origins and once served as its capital. Although that honor had since been transferred to Grantsrale, Nalthia still retained the Empire's highest privilege. It was the final resting place of generations of Emperors and the site of the purification ceremony.

The four Imperial children had once chased one another in and around the city.

"Your Highness, Nalthia is important, but shouldn't we prioritize defeating Princess Lowellmina?"

Bardloche shook his head at his commander's question.

"No. We have fewer soldiers than expected, and Grantsrale is the seat of her territory. Even if we managed to seize the Imperial Capital, she might escape. Worse yet, Manfred is liable to slip into Nalthia, undergo the purification ceremony, and announce his own coronation while we're occupied."

To become the rightful Emperor, one first had to complete the purification ceremony in Nalthia and later hold a coronation in the capital of Grantsrale. Lowellmina had already performed the former, but her crowning was incomplete owing to a lack of citizen support and merit. Bardloche was in a similar position. Even if he underwent the purification ceremony and announced his ascension, the Empire's populace wouldn't accept him.

However, Manfred could conceivably push his way to the throne, proclaim himself the new Emperor, and reinforce Bardloche's role as a traitor.

"I see. Yes, Your Highness is right…"

"Regrettably, we still don't have enough soldiers to defend Nalthia."

"We've captured the city before. We'll just have to use that experience to do it again."

"I doubt the other factions desire to spill blood there."

Following this discussion, Bardloche's forces decided to focus on Nalthia. However, a surprise awaited them at the old capital—Manfred's vanguard.

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"Tch, those idiots…!" Manfred, dressed for battle atop his warhorse, clicked his tongue in irritation.

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped. Everyone seeks recognition, after all," Strang replied from the horse beside the Third Prince's. "Besides, we're an undisciplined rabble, quite unlike Bardloche's army."

"I'm surprised to hear you admit that."

"It's the truth."

Manfred sighed quietly while Strang offered inflammatory remarks without the slightest hint of shame.

Manfred's soldiers had set out from their domain several days after Bardloche's forces began their march. Their main target was, of course, the head of the traitorous Second Imperial Prince.

However, Manfred's troops moved in a disorderly fashion, quite unlike Bardloche's. This was to be expected since the army consisted of commanders

from each province. Although they followed the gist of Manfred's plan, the soldiers served under different banners. If Bardloche's army was a single organism, Manfred's was a school of little fish. Skirmishes broke out among Manfred's commanders daily. The deterioration of his army became more obvious with time.

That's why it was, in a way, inevitable. Some of the leaders, in their pursuit of glory, grew tired of the slow advance on Bardloche instead of charging. Eventually, they declared themselves a separate vanguard and hurried ahead to strike Bardloche's forces from the rear.

"Fortunately, that reckless contingent is small. Whatever they attempt, it will make little difference," Strang said.

"What do you think will happen to them?" Manfred asked.

"Doesn't it go without saying?" he replied.

A messenger rode up to them on horseback.

"Your Highness, I have a report. The vanguard has been destroyed!"

Neither Manfred nor Strang was surprised by this, and they both sighed. Bardloche's soldiers were renowned as the greatest in the Empire. His new recruits were yet inexperienced, but still ranked better than Manfred's warriors. During previous battles against Bardloche, Manfred's planning and preparation to generate a tactical advantage earned him only fifty-fifty odds against his brother. A stab in the back by a few small fries would hardly leave a scratch on Bardloche. That was not to suggest he and his soldiers were cocky, however. They knew this was their final stand. A single well-placed kick could knock them away and seal their fate.

"It was a needless sacrifice," Manfred spat.

Strang shook his head. "That's not true. Thanks to this minor loss, our lax army will pull itself together and take our opponents seriously."

"I guess that's one way of looking at it… Wait."

That can't be.

Manfred cast a look at Strang, wondering if the man had purposefully allowed the vanguard to break away, knowing it would be crushed.

"Now the other units will fall into line when the time comes for our decisive conflict. For now, let's continue to maintain a reasonable distance and tail the enemy as planned… Is something wrong, Your Highness?"

"…It's nothing."

There was surely more to this man than suggested at first glance.

Manfred gripped his reins tightly.

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Manfred's offensive vanguard never stood a chance. Bardloche's rear units stopped, pivoted, and overwhelmed them all at once. In fact, the battle was so short-lived that the victors had to wonder if the vanguard was a trap by way of diversion.

"What was that supposed to accomplish?"

"Even if the vanguard was carrying out a reconnaissance-in-force, their form was all over the place."

"Most of Manfred's soldiers are from the provinces. Maybe he doesn't have full control over them?"

After a brief discussion, Bardloche's military concluded that an overzealous unit had gone rogue because Manfred lacked proper command of his troops. This was fantastic news for Bardloche. The enemy's lack of experience was certainly welcome, and a victory, even if it was just against the vanguard, also did wonders for troop morale.

"Your Highness, we are approaching Nalthia!"

"Understood. Their defenses will try to drive us back, but pay that no mind. We'll take the city in one go."

"Yes, sir!"

Bardloche heard the energy in his men's voices as their pace quickened. At this rate, they'd take Nalthia, defeat Lowellmina in the capital, and finish off Manfred soon after. Anticipation sparked among Bardloche's soldiers…

…only to crumble apart moments later.

"Y-Your Highness! We have an issue!" called a frantic voice, and Bardloche urged his steed forward to investigate. He was met by the unthinkable.

"Wh-what's that…?"

"This can't be happening."

No one could believe it—not even Bardloche. Yet no matter how many times he rubbed his eyes, the scene remained unchanged.

Try as he did to deny it, the Second Prince had no recourse but to accept the truth.

"Why is Demetrio's flag flying in Nalthia?!"

The First Imperial Prince Demetrio had departed from the world stage with his personal legion after his political defeat. Yet now they awaited Bardloche's

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army in Nalthia.

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“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Two figures stood atop Nalthia’s rampart.

“I bet my stupid little brothers are speechless right about now!”

A man guffawed loudly for all to hear. His name was Demetrio, Earthworld’s First Imperial Prince.

“I never thought we’d all get to square off this late in the game. How delightful!” Demetrio glanced at the man standing beside him on the stronghold wall. “And I’ve got you to thank for this, Prince Wein!”

Wein grinned at Demetrio’s praise.

The old capital of Nalthia was sacred land to the Empire. Excluding the area along the shores of Veijyu Lake, which saw lots of maritime transportation, it was normally a solemn, quiet city. However, it was presently engulfed in a storm of anarchy.

"Hold your positions! Bardloche's army is closing in!"

Defensive units scrambled while shouts sounded from every direction. If the endless metallic clattering of soldiers outfitted in armor had somehow become the rattle of coins, the sum would bury the city in riches. Amid all this, a young woman ran to and fro, checking on the fortification progress. It was Ninym.

"Our southern defense is fine, and the western front is almost ready. The east is slightly behind schedule. I'll check in on their statuses again later… For now, I should visit the supply point."

A man ran up to Ninym while she mumbled to herself.

"There you are, Lady Ninym."

"Oh, Captain Raklum," Ninym replied upon noticing him. "Have we established a defensive chain of command?"

Raklum shook his head. "Both sides are still arguing. The guards already stationed here and the soldiers who serve Demetrio can't seem to come to an agreement. And we lack the numbers to meddle…"

"I suppose that's to be expected… I'll speak with Prince Wein and Prince Demetrio to see if they can intervene."

"That would be much appreciated. Even if both sides have been caught off guard, I shudder to think of what might happen if we went into battle without proper leadership."

"I agree. We must be prepared for anything… What about the escape route?"

Raklum gave Ninym a firm nod. "An oarsman and boat are waiting in a storehouse to the north. If necessary, please use them to see the prince to safety.

We'll buy you enough time."

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

"That will depend on the other party," Raklum replied before adopting a somewhat optimistic expression. "His Highness's approach never fails to astound. I never imagined we'd get embroiled in something like this when we departed from Natra."

"Yes, I didn't expect us to interfere in such a manner either," Ninym replied with slight exasperation. "And if we're surprised, I can only imagine *their* astonishment…"

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"Our scouts have returned. As we suspected, there is no question that Prince Demetrio and his men have occupied Nalthia…!"

"Ngh…"

Back at his main camp, Bardloche, sensing something odd about Nalthia, temporarily halted on the outskirts of the city and sent soldiers to investigate. Their findings confirmed the banner adorning Nalthia's ramparts was unmistakably authentic.

"…What kind of manpower does Demetrio have?"

"We've received several verbal testimonies that between three to five thousand soldiers have entered the city," one subordinate answered.

"It would come as no surprise to find fresh traces of men and horses in the surrounding area," replied another.

An estimated five thousand soldiers.

Bardloche had been under the impression that Nalthia's defenses were subpar, making this an unwelcome surprise. His victory was still guaranteed, but that added protection meant it wouldn't be so easy.

"Your Highness, whatever Prince Demetrio's motives, he is clearly only an obstacle! We should storm Nalthia immediately!"

"…"

His subordinate was right; they had very few options left. However, Bardloche also knew such actions posed an immense risk. Enough that their entire army could be wiped out if things went south.

What should I do?

Bardloche fell deeper into dismay, but his troubles weren't over yet.

"Um, there is one other report."

“What?! You mean there’s *more*…?!”

“Yes. Our investigation is still in progress, but from what we’ve heard…”

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“Demetrio *and* Prince Wein are in Nalthia…?!”

Manfred couldn’t suppress the hoarse exclamation after hearing the news from a subordinate.

“Yes. It appears they’re working together…”

News of the First Prince’s militia occupying Nalthia had reached Manfred’s ears just as it had Bardloche’s. Worse yet, Wein had been spotted in the city as well. The Third Prince normally kept his emotions in check, but even he failed to contain his surprise over this development.

“Strang, what’s going on?!”

“I’d heard Prince Demetrio retired to the countryside, and I doubt his actions here are spontaneous. Thus, there can only be one answer.”

Wein had forced Demetrio out of isolation; Strang was certain of it. Despite the meticulous stage Strang had set, Wein had elected to stay and interfere. The man was a total eccentric, but Strang wouldn’t lose on this point either.

However, that meant the real challenge would be dealing with Wein and Demetrio.

What in the world are they after…? And how do they justify occupying Nalthia?

While Strang’s mind raced, a messenger came running.

“Pardon me! An envoy from Prince Demetrio has just arrived!”

“An envoy? What for?”

“Yes, well…”

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“‘Our neighboring ally, Crown Prince Wein, and Ernesto, the Leader of Eastern Levetia, are scheduled to meet in Nalthia. Naturally, the Empire should offer its support as the host. I can’t believe you two insist on dragging out this pointless war. I’d already given up playing your game, but chose to return to make this conference happen. You’re welcome, my idiot brothers.’” Demetrio stopped and smiled. “My messengers should be delivering these very words to those fools right about now.”

“Both camps are surely in for a shock,” Wein replied with a crafty look.

The two met in a private room of a Nalthia mansion. Neither commanded the military, so they were free to relax for a bit while the generals and soldiers readied the defenses.

"I'm still surprised you pulled me back in, you know."

"I knew I'd found the perfect pawn for the job. Besides, weren't you just killing time in the countryside?"

The meeting with Ernesto was to be held in Nalthia.

Wein had concluded this was the only way for him to intercede. Strang had erected various safeguards to keep Wein outside the loop, but he didn't once interfere with the prince's plan to visit the Empire for a talk with Ernesto. Whether this was because meddling would be too much of a hassle or because Strang didn't wish to irritate Wein further was unclear. However, Wein intended to take the utmost advantage of this conference to further his agenda.

The princes will try to take Nalthia. I should chat with Eastern Levetia and Prime Minister Keskinel and establish the city as our meetup, Wein had reasoned before meeting with Prince Demetrio.

Eastern Levetia had been easy enough to convince. A deep rift had formed between the religion and Bardloche's faction after the former had vilified the latter. Eastern Levetia would take Lowellmina or Manfred over Bardloche any day. Wein had imagined Ernesto would happily agree to a meeting in Nalthia if it meant getting in the Second Prince's way.

However, Wein understood that Eastern Levetia had little to offer in the way of tangible support.

His current delegation was lean, and Eastern Levetia couldn't mobilize an immense force. Bardloche or Manfred could storm the city to cut the conference short.

Thus, Wein had coaxed Demetrio out of his seclusion. The First Prince previously suffered a political defeat, but he still held favor with the Empire's conservatives. If Demetrio hosted this meetup, Wein could tap his supporters for assistance. To that end, he'd contacted the ousted prince and made his request.

"Hmph. I may have been defeated, but you still show tremendous insolence by daring to treat a prince of the Empire like a pawn," Demetrio scoffed. He didn't look too upset, though. "Very well, then. It will please me greatly to make my foolish brothers turn red with fury. Still, it's unfortunate I can't witness the sight firsthand."

"Imagination is all you need. If you witnessed it directly, your sides might split."

“Ha-ha-ha! Good point!”

Demetrio burst out laughing, and Wein threw him a sidelong glance as he pondered.

I’m kind of surprised that Keskinel agreed so easily.

Anyone else would have demanded Wein cancel the event. This was to be a banquet with a foreign guest of honor in the middle of a war zone, after all.

Of course, Wein had a more forceful second plan in case the first one didn’t pan out. Yet the key players accepted his proposal almost immediately. It was nearly unsettling.

I always knew Keskinel was a shrewd guy…but it looks like things are about to get a lot more interesting.

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Although the final battle between the Imperial siblings loomed, that didn’t excuse the long list of daily tasks that demanded attention. Keskinel continued to oversee his desk work as Prime Minister while he prepared for the reports that would stream in during the upcoming battle.

“…Are you sure about this, Prime Minister?”

“What do you mean?” Keskinel asked without taking his eyes off his work. The aide proceeded to clarify.

“I am referring to this meeting between Prince Wein and His Grace Ernesto. Why would they wish to hold it in Nalthia now of all times? And with Prince Demetrio playing the host, no less.”

“I don’t see the issue,” Keskinel replied, dismissing his subordinate’s concern. “The conference between Prince Wein and His Grace was scheduled beforehand. If anything, we ought to reexamine our ineptitude if a simple visit from an esteemed foreign guest rattles us so.”

“Y-yes, but…”

“In addition, Nalthia will be the venue. It is the Empire’s symbol of authority, and the other party must show due respect. I would have preferred to oversee the meeting myself, but Prince Wein has already designated Prince Demetrio. The two share close ties, and if the First Prince has accepted, then I have no objections.”

Keskinel’s response made sense. Normally, no one would bat an eye if Demetrio oversaw a meeting between Wein and Ernesto in Nalthia. Of course, this could hardly be called “normal.”

“Prime Minister, sir, Nalthia is a literal war zone!” the subordinate exclaimed.

“The Imperial children are merely acting on their whims,” Keskinel answered bluntly. “The Empire is unrelated and must continue to work as a cohesive unit. Dissension has weakened our realm and tarnished our authority. This decision will not mar my internal neutrality in the slightest.”

Keskinel’s declaration silenced the other man. The Imperial Prime Minister gave a tiny smile.

“Of course, that isn’t to say my choice will have no effect on the fight for succession. I’m unsure how each royal will make the most of this rare opportunity, but strength is born through adversity.”

“Your Excellency…”

“Don’t worry, we still have time before the birth of a new, glorious Emperor.”

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“Grahh…!”

Bardloche groused outside the old capital. Demetrio had seized the city and insisted he was only there for a meeting. He even claimed the increased security was meant to ensure everything went off without a hitch despite the volatile environment. He also insisted he lacked any political motives.

Don’t screw with me, you idiot. Bardloche cursed his elder sibling a thousand times over. This was clearly meant to thwart his advance on Nalthia, regardless of whatever spin Demetrio put on it.

Still, there was one thing Bardloche couldn’t understand. Close investigation revealed that a majority of Nalthia’s forces consisted of conservatives originally loyal to Demetrio. However, they should have allied with Lowellmina upon his defeat.

There was a possibility that while Demetrio’s banner hung from the ramparts, he was actually a part of Lowellmina’s army. However, Bardloche also heard that the conservatives and Lowellmina were at odds with each other. It was likely they’d deserted her and returned to Demetrio. The princess was Bardloche’s enemy, no question, but the First Prince might be open to a united front.

That being said, the other side offered no indication of movement. Was Demetrio waiting for the right opportunity, or did he believe there was no value

in an alliance with Bardloche?

The Second Prince wished to charge in and pummel all his opponents indiscriminately, but that wasn't an option.

Keskinel has approved of this meeting in Nalthia. Demetrio's forces are keeping on the defensive. If I get rough now and throw Nalthia into the heat of battle, my army will fall!

Ever since Bardloche's faction contacted the West, Eastern Levetia had considered it a bitter foe. Bardloche had colluded with the West, but only his most trusted advisors were privy to that information. The prince assured everyone else that it was baseless political slander cooked up by Manfred. That put Bardloche's soldiers on the side of justice and maintained morale. However, if Bardloche ordered an attack upon the Empire's symbol of authority, and the truth about his dealings came to light, his troops' confidence would plummet.

If either Manfred or Lowellmina had occupied Nalthia, Bardloche would still have had cause to strike. But Demetrio, who'd already dropped out of the fight for the throne, insisted his only intention was to host a meeting. Although infuriating, Bardloche had no legitimate excuse to interfere. He needed some kind of political maneuver, but such tactics weren't up his faction's alley.

But even if I leave Nalthia alone and head for the capital, I'll still have the threat of Demetrio's and Manfred's armies on my heels! Manfred might walk straight into Nalthia and announce his purification ceremony to the whole Empire! And if he does, I'm done for!

Bardloche couldn't attack Nalthia or leave it alone. The prince's do-or-die attitude wavered. He was struck by uncertainty, and that hesitation sealed his fate.

"I have a report! Troops have been sighted in the south! They bear the flag of Princess Lowellmina!"

The princess, who'd been preparing for battle in the capital, suddenly sprang into action.

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Lowellmina had been aware of the plan since Fyshe returned with a letter from Wein.

"…What?" she'd breathed. It was hard to believe he'd try to draw Demetrio out. However, the princess was equally formidable; she'd quickly recovered and reviewed Wein's plan.

It's not…entirely impossible.

There had been four deciding factors.

The first had been whether or not they could convince Demetrio. However, there was no question Wein would succeed. Lowellmina knew those two shared an odd connection that wasn't quite friendship, perhaps owing to their previous collaboration. If anyone could persuade Demetrio, it was Wein.

Next was Keskinel. Lowellmina and Wein had needed the Prime Minister's permission to hold a meeting in Nalthia. However, Lowellmina hadn't worried about this. Keskinel harbored a peculiar value system, and since plans for a conference had always been on the table, he'd had every reason to approve. And if the Prime Minister gave his blessing, there was no question the third factor, Eastern Levetia, would follow suit. After all, it had requested the meetup be held in the Empire in the first place. The conference had nearly been canceled because of the recent chaos, but the Church would attend so long as the other parties showed they could hold their ground.

Of course, there would be no *actual* meeting in a war zone. Wein was merely borrowing everyone's credibility.

The final obstacle was the biggest—the troops protecting Nalthia.

Since Lowellmina had been busy assembling her own forces, she couldn't spare any elsewhere. Furthermore, this task, at least on the surface, was meant to *protect those holding the Empire's most important and simultaneously carefree meeting*. The majority of Lowellmina's soldiers were outraged volunteers who lamented the Empire's future. She couldn't send them.

Then, the conservatives in Lowellmina's faction caught Wein's eye. They'd originally belonged to Demetrio's faction, so it made sense to believe they would be eager to return to their former master.

Still, this won't be easy, Lowellmina had thought.

The conservatives were lazy and had already disregarded her own request for troops. Demetrio was their *old* master, plus there was nothing to be gained by returning to him. If their current liege couldn't control them, what hope did the previous one have?

Shortly after Lowellmina had this notion, the conservatives rushed over to Nalthia.

"Huh?"

Lowellmina had been furious.

"Y-Your Highness, please calm yourself."

"I haven't lost my cool. I simply cannot help but wonder why they are

suddenly compliant even though everyone made excuses and wouldn't listen to a single word I said before, but I assure you I am perfectly calm."

After Fyshe had consoled Lowellmina and she had regained her composure, she returned to theorizing on how Wein's plan would operate.

"Prepare a letter, Fyshe. There's something I want you to deliver in secret."

"Yes, right away."

Lowellmina had reached her conclusion.

"It's time to make my debut. This victory shall be mine."

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Lowellmina's army boasted about eight thousand soldiers. The majority were volunteers who admired the princess, decried the princes as good-for-nothings, and held a sense of righteous indignation against the West. Less than half were formally trained. One could easily label them rank-and-file troops who possessed the bare minimum amount of discipline or skill.

However, their spirits were unmatched. No one, from the lowest soldier to the most elite veteran, doubted their cause, and Lowellmina took direct command. Everyone was determined to demonstrate their valor to the radiant princess.

Bardloche's legion totaled ten thousand; each soldier was a hardened veteran who understood the art of war like the back of their hand. They were prepared to overtake the enemy in a direct confrontation. Their morale, however, was terrible. Bardloche's troops had been branded traitors, and the sudden occupation of Nalthia prevented them from acting. In the meantime, Lowellmina's forces had appeared before Bardloche's while Demetrio's took the capital from behind.

Moreover, Manfred's militia of approximately ten thousand had kept its distance while entering the battle between Bardloche and Lowellmina's units. Instead of launching an immediate attack on Bardloche, it carefully sealed off his escape routes. Manfred's forces' morale and tactical expertise were palpable.

Still, for all their cunning, the Third Prince's soldiers had been assembled by provincial leaders. Each fought for their own home, and their level of discipline depended on the tide of the fight.

"So, who will reign victorious?" Wein mumbled as he considered the chaos that threatened to erupt outside the city.

Demetrio shot him a questioning look. "Even you don't know?"

"There are several invisible factors at work here."

“Hmm… Well, so long as everything works out as we discussed, that’s enough for me,” the First Prince said. “Prince Wein, are you certain this will bridge the gap between the conservatives and Lowellmina?”

“Yes, you can rest assured on that point.”

How can I pull Demetrio out of his seclusion and back on the world stage?

Wein had wrestled with this issue in the hope of occupying Nalthia. Demetrio had withdrawn from the squabble for Emperor quietly. Even if Wein had tried to lure the First Prince back with money or another shot at the throne, there was a good chance it would only dissuade him and bring everything to a screeching halt. Wein had then turned his focus to the tension between Lowellmina and the conservatives.

They’ve been at odds from the start. The conservatives won’t accept an Empress. Their group would unravel if any of them did.

This was the dilemma among conservatives. As the name implied, the organization honored history and tradition. Readily accepting the rule of a trailblazer like Lowellmina would undermine that reputation. Still, its members weren’t oblivious to reality. The conservatives had previously revolted against Bardloche and Manfred and understood it was far too late to join either. Their best option was to support Lowellmina as Empress while protecting their interests.

And so the conservatives had continued to search for a compromise, a way to serve Lowellmina while remaining true to their convictions, if only by the bare minimum.

Then came the proposal for Demetrio’s return.

“The conservatives have valiantly come to assist their former master, Prince Demetrio. Moved by this unauthorized yet touching gesture, Lowellmina will magnanimously forgive them and thereby earn their respect. This way, both sides can finally have a real working relationship.”

Serving Lowellmina had few downsides, and she could handle the conservatives even after this minor betrayal.

“I see…” Demetrio said softly. “I really couldn’t do anything for them. If it will put the issue to rest, that’s fine by me.”

The conservatives had supported Demetrio’s bid for Emperor, but his shortcomings had cost them a bright future. The prince undoubtedly still had misgivings on the matter, but he’d swallowed his pride, accepted Wein’s offer, and returned to the spotlight.

“Once this is all over, I’m going to live freely with my wife and child.”

Wein's shoulders twitched. "…You have a child?"

Demetrio nodded shyly. "Yeah. I dismissed all my concubines when I went into isolation, but one insisted on joining me. Then…well, we had a child together."

"…Hmm, yes, I see."

"I meant to leave everything to a wet nurse, but my little one is just too cute for words. My wife scolds me for hovering."

"Hmm! Yes! I see!"

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“What’s wrong, Prince Wein? You seem agitated.”

“No, I’m fine. It’s not like I’m thinking, ‘Look at this lucky bastard living the quiet life with his beloved’ or anything, so don’t mind me!” Wein grumbled like the poor sport he was.

“Your Highness!”

A flustered messenger dashed over.

“The soldiers outside are on the move!”

“So the time has finally come.”

Demetrio gave a solemn nod, and Wein responded to the report with a question.

“Who made the first move?”

“Bardloche!” the man replied.

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Bardloche and his army were in trouble, and that was putting it lightly. They were stuck in a political corner and should’ve marched into battle like their lives depended on it. Unfortunately, they were surrounded by Manfred, Lowellmina, and Demetrio. This fact weighed heavily on every soldier, and all fell into mute despondency. Ironically enough, it could be said such composure in the face of adversity was proof of their discipline. They would stick together and fight no matter the odds.

“…”

Bardloche, who should’ve been leading his troops, couldn’t help but fall into a pit of despair.

“Your Highness…”

Even his top commanders had no clue what to say as time continued to pass. They still had a chance to escape. If they didn’t concern themselves with potential casualties, Bardloche and his troops could break past Lowellmina’s or Manfred’s lines.

But what would come afterward?

Bardloche had been made an enemy of the Empire practically overnight. Only a miracle could save him now. Escaping would only guarantee he’d be captured and executed later. Once he understood the inevitability that awaited him, it was challenging to see much hope beyond the immediate getaway.

And any chance of victory here was—

“Prince Bardloche!”

A conspicuously loud voice caught everyone's attention.

"I have a plan!"

The voice belonged to Glen. The only shining beacon in the otherwise dismal camp stood firm as all eyes fell on him.

"A plan?" Bardloche repeated as he glanced up slowly. "Have you seen this blockade? What can we possibly do now?"

"With all due respect, Prince Bardloche, perhaps you should look closer."

Whispers were traded around the two. Glen's behavior was the height of insolence, but Bardloche was more puzzled than upset.

"…What do you see?"

"Three completely motionless armies all around us," Glen replied.

A strange sensation gradually fell over Bardloche and everyone within earshot. The three enemy forces had yet to attack. They'd merely surrounded Bardloche's camp and exchanged glares.

"In all likelihood, Demetrio's troops in Nalthia are the weakest threat. We don't know their political motivations, but any offense on their part will be swiftly crushed. Demetrio is aware of this, which is why the city has remained inactive. It may be prudent to leave them be," Glen explained. "The other two ringleaders, Prince Manfred and Princess Lowellmina, understand that Your Highness's defeat is their key to the throne. However, you only have one head, and conflict between your two rivals is inevitable. Even if one of them manages to take your head, the other will refuse to recognize them. As soon as either defeats us, it will spark a decisive clash between the remaining contenders."

"Which means…"

"Yes, it is as you've deduced, Your Highness. It is absolutely vital that both sides conserve their strength and mitigate damage until the final conflict. That is the reason for this stalemate. Each army intends to force the other to wear us down so they can win the upcoming battle."

Lowellmina and Manfred each wanted the other to engage Bardloche so they could swoop in and take his head at the last second. That was why Manfred didn't attack from behind and why Lowellmina led her soldiers onto the battlefield instead of hiding away in the capital. Now the two watched each other closely. Their tactics for the final showdown were already in place.

"Hmph. So I'm just the opening act?!"

Bardloche's grin seethed with anger and self-derision. Such negativity was dangerous in war, but Glen felt it rejuvenate his master.

"I understand your frustration. However, this is an excellent opportunity,

Your Highness."

"It is?"

"If both parties refuse to act, we can unilaterally attack either Manfred or Lowellmina." Glen paused for a moment. "If we mobilize our entire army, they'll respond in kind. However, I can tell that a few small units won't be enough to end the stalemate. Therefore, after putting our main units on the defensive, we'll send our best soldiers to attack Lowellmina's camp and capture the princess. That is my suggestion if we hope to crawl back from the brink of death."

The crowd stirred, offering comments like "That's reckless" and "There's no way it will work." However, Glen stood his ground and gazed directly at Bardloche.

"…Why Lowellmina?" the prince questioned.

"It's due to the nature of her army. Most are common soldiers, and our best warriors have a decent chance of shattering her defenses. The princess's troops idolize her and will ruthlessly fight to the death if she is killed. Conversely, we can take Princess Lowellmina as a live hostage and demand her military disperse in exchange for her safe return. Doing so would leave Princess Lowellmina's forces helpless against Manfred's assembly of provincial leaders."

Lowellmina herself possessed no skills as a military commander. Someone like her typically entrusted the fighting to her subordinates and awaited news of victory from the Imperial Capital.

And yet Lowellmina commanded an entire army. It did wonders for the soldiers' morale, but it meant they'd lose that inspiration without her. Lowellmina's troops were emotionally dependent on her, and this point formed the crux of Glen's strategy.

Whether or not Prince Bardloche agrees to it is a whole other story…

It was outrageous for the captain of a single unit to advise his master, and Glen would never get another chance if the prince rejected his proposal here. It would also spell Bardloche's defeat.

"Your name is Glen, right?" Bardloche asked simply.

Although startled to discover the prince remembered his name, Glen respectfully bowed his head.

"We'll go with your plan. Take your soldiers and capture Lowellmina."

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“Understood!”

Glen steeled himself.

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“Let’s go on the offensive,” Strang suggested.

Back in Manfred’s camp, the prince and his commanders deliberated over this proposal.

“Weren’t we going to wait and let Lowellmina and Bardloche wear each other down?” Manfred asked.

Glen had correctly surmised their strategy, and everyone questioned Strang’s proposal to change tactics. He offered an explanation to ease their concerns.

“Lowellmina has opted for a similar method, putting us in this deadlock. At this rate, Bardloche’s army is liable to recover.”

“We surround them, so we’re at a major advantage.”

“Still, we mustn’t underestimate our foe. Bardloche’s soldiers are powerful, and it’s possible they could take on Lowellmina and us if they find their morale again. We must goad his army beforehand and wear them down in body and spirit.”

“But won’t that hurt us and handicap our forces in the later battle?” Manfred asked skeptically.

“There’s no need to worry,” Strang replied. “Defeating Bardloche will rob Lowellmina of her claim to the throne. It’s in her best interest to let us fight him and wait until the last minute to jump in and take out the Second Prince, but Lowellmina’s ragtag group lacks patience and a keen, strategic eye. If we attack, her forces will immediately rush in as well.”

Strang further explained that Manfred’s soldiers would search for an opening to eliminate the Second Prince while Bardloche and Lowellmina were busy tiring each other out.

“All right, I’ll leave it up to you,” Manfred declared.

“Understood.”

Strang gave a deep bow.

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“Princess Lowellmina, both enemies have begun to move.”

The princess’s well-protected tent sat in the very heart of her camp along the plains.

“Manfred is on the offensive while Bardloche focuses on defense,” the messenger continued.

“What about us?”

“Headquarters has commanded us to remain defensive, but skirmishes have broken out along part of the front lines, and they’re spreading gradually.”

“I see… I hoped to wait longer until we spotted an opportune moment, but I suppose it can’t be helped. We’re a patchwork militia, after all.”

Despite this admission, Lowellmina hadn’t expected her soldiers’ patience to be tested so thoroughly. Self-discipline was challenging to maintain where deadly combat was involved. It wouldn’t be long before Lowellmina’s forces succumbed and launched a full-scale attack on Bardloche. A certain scheming four-eyes smirked in her mind.

“There is one other matter I must report. A small unit from Bardloche’s camp is apparently headed this way. Shall I urge headquarters to remain alert and bolster our security?”

“No, I’ll leave the situation up to them. My opinion would only invite needless chaos.”

Lowellmina was the supreme commander, but the generals of her faction made all the combat decisions. Their main stronghold was a short distance away from her tent. This was because Lowellmina lacked the skills necessary to command an army. Still, the princess wasn’t indifferent to such matters, so she elected to remain nearby.

At any rate, it was no exaggeration to say modern politics and warfare were strictly limited to the realm of men. Despite Lowellmina’s political acumen, sticking her nose into military affairs would spark a wave of protest even at the best of times. When it came to achieving her goals, Lowellmina was akin to a hurricane, yet she preferred not to go about stirring up unnecessary conflict. She refused to bend the military to her will, and so long as no one else cared, she was content to leave it alone.

The leaders of Lowellmina’s army were hardly first-rate—such people served other factions—but they could be trusted to handle command until her plan was complete.

“That small unit is most likely after me. We’ll be unable to function if I’m captured.”

The top commander was typically an army’s backbone, but Lowellmina’s force was different. The princess was far more vital to her soldiers than any general.

“In that case, Your Highness, I suggest reinforcing our guard.”

“We’ll be fine,” she answered breezily. “I’m well aware that the enemy will stop at nothing to storm this camp. We’ll employ our ample defenses, the unwieldy terrain, and traps to double and triple our safety. Bardloche could send half his men, and we’d still prove we won’t be defeated so easily.”

“W-well, then…”

“I don’t know what our attackers are like, but their mission will end in failure. At the very least, we should wish them peace in the afterlife.”

Lowellmina seemed to be the very image of composure. Yet no sooner had she given her declaration than a commotion erupted outside the tent.

“What was that? I’ll go check.”

Fyshe left to investigate and returned several seconds later. Her expression was grim.

“Your Highness! The enemy has breached our defensive line!”

Lowellmina’s smile froze.

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“Run! And keep running! You’ll drown in a sea of enemies if you stop!”

Glen shouted to his warriors as he raced across the battlefield on horseback. He’d been tasked with leading a brutal attack and was now in the heart of Lowellmina’s camp with only a few of his best men. Waves of enemies rose from every direction to stop their charge.

“Out of my way!”

However, Glen repelled each attempt, and his valor emboldened the soldiers trailing behind him. Brushing aside hostile blades and arrows, Glen rode ahead of the pack like an unstoppable force of nature.

But he did more than simply plunge forward.

“We’re changing directions! Turn left!”

“But the enemy is more spread out straight ahead!”

“It’s a trap. We’ll be crushed if we go that way,”

Glen steered his mount to the left, just as he said. His followers were quick to follow suit. Looking back, they spotted an ambush that had been concealed from their earlier position.

“What…?!”

“The captain saw right through their trap!”

Glen’s subordinates sang his praises, but this brought him no joy. Failing to

accomplish something like this meant he'd never match his friends.

Ultimately, I've done nothing except learn to swing a sword.

Born into a military family and raised as a soldier since childhood, Glen had pushed himself tirelessly. He didn't consider himself particularly talented, but Glen took pride in his work ethic despite those shortcomings. In truth, he felt a secret sense of superiority over the many peers he'd left in the dust.

Then Wein and the others came and smashed that confidence.

Glen understood that Wein, Ninym, Strang, and Lowellmina were all his equals regardless of their differences. No, their genius surpassed him. This truth threatened to overwhelm him anytime they were together.

However, it gave rise to a desire within Glen.

He didn't want to lose.

His was a drive to win, to succeed. He wanted to stand side by side. He wished to be their friend and their equal. Glen believed that feeling had fostered his growth. Indeed, his swordsmanship had grown by leaps and bounds after meeting them.

Nevertheless, the gap remained.

Knowledge, resourcefulness, eloquence, skill, courage. His friends honed their individual arsenals and combined various skill sets to produce stunning results.

Glen, on the other hand, had military expertise and nothing more. Compared to the others, who observed every situation in broad, overhead strokes and reacted accordingly, what value was there in a soldier who could only reach out at arm's length? As Glen watched everyone thrive, he held fast to those scorching emotions and briefly considered abandoning the sword to find another calling. Perhaps some soul-searching would reveal a hidden talent that could help him catch up.

However, Glen took a good, hard look at himself and concluded that, yes, the sword was all he had. Thus, he resolved to make the most of it. He didn't have a sharp political mind and couldn't devise ingenious battle tactics. Once Glen had accepted this, he continued honing the combat abilities his friends praised. Even if the blade was his only talent, he'd prove it could take a dragon's head.

"Captain! I see it! That's their headquarters!"

Before his subordinate said anything, Glen had spied the heart of Lowellmina's camp beyond the enemy lines.

Lowa…!

He immediately took note of his foes' positions and movements, as well as

the tents' locations.

That one in the center has to be their base of operations. The commanders must be inside. Yet their formation is…

Glen's gaze drifted to a tent off to one side just as a group of cavalrymen emerged from behind it.

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"Your Highness, with all due respect, I must insist that we retreat…!" exclaimed the commander, who acted as the true leader of Lowellmina's army.

Once she'd learned *he* was coming, Lowellmina understood the gravity of the situation.

"Will that small enemy incursion reach us?"

Lowellmina immediately regretted her insensitive question.

"N-no, of course not. However mighty our foes, we have sworn to protect you, Your Highness, and we'll not allow them to lay a single finger on you."

A commander could give the Imperial Princess no other answer.

"However, you must expect the unexpected on the field of battle. It is always wise to prepare for that one in a million, no, one in a hundred million chance!"

Lowellmina sensed peril when the commander stood his ground on a point he'd normally concede. She had detected something in the air earlier, as perhaps the commander had as well. Defense was one matter, but escape was another entirely. As Lowellmina's opponent drew dangerously close, her mind raced at lightning speed.

I'll only be a burden on the battlefield…

She accepted this undeniable fact. Still, it didn't mean Lowellmina was entirely useless. Glen likely commanded the group that was after her. She could tell that he was behind this inexplicable attack. As such, she had no way to turn the tide.

What else could be done?

"…Fyshe."

"Yes!"

"We're going to cross a *very* iffy bridge."

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Glen kept his sword readied as the cavalry came rushing out, but he swiftly froze. His faltering resulted from two factors: First, the riders charged straight

for him instead of riding to escape. And second, Lowellmina rode at the forefront.

"Lo—"

Glen wasn't the only one surprised. His men were stunned as well. The sight of this defenseless young woman taking to the field could only be described as bizarre. And she was grinning.

Their hesitation didn't escape Lowellmina's notice.

"You seem confused, Glen."

There was no mistaking the voice that flew past him.

Lowellmina and several others sped past Glen's unit, but instead of fleeing to safety, they plunged straight into the tumultuous war zone.

"Wha—!"

Glen's eyes widened with shock, but he and Lowa immediately understood each other.

Lowa is the key to her soldiers' morale! She can't leave the battlefield if she hopes to win!

Glen needs to capture me to stop my army!

Retreat means forfeiting the protection of her guards! I need to capture Lowa, so that will be to my advantage!

So I'll escape by charging forward instead of back and will shield myself in the chaos!

If Lowa is fatally struck by an arrow or falls to her death, the enemy will go berserk and attack our army! Even if her demise comes from friendly fire!

This was a new kind of problem. Glen now had the unenviable task of trying to swipe Lowellmina from her horse and make his escape amid a battle of clashing steel and flying arrows.

"Ngh…!"

Glen looked over his shoulder. Whether by coincidence or fate, Lowellmina turned at the exact same time. Their eyes met, and she smiled.

"Do your best, Glen! If I die here, we *both* lose!"

"You would use your own life as a last-minute shield, Lowa?!"

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Lowellmina was at her wit's end. She had no riding experience outside of

carriages and had obviously never darted across a battlefield before.

"Your Highness! Please keep hold of the reins no matter what!" a guard called to her.

"I know, but what happens if I don't?!"

"You'll fall!"

"And if I fall?!"

"You'll die!"

Lowellmina's scream was drowned out by hooves beating against the earth.

I take it all back! This was a terrible idea! The worst!

Regardless, she was out of options. Tremors in the ground traveled up Lowellmina's steed to pass through her, and she held back a wave of nausea to avoid tumbling.

A show of strength won't help me win against this enemy. I need to highlight my weakness!

Had she taken a carriage, Glen's unit would have targeted the horses and coachmen to stop it. Likewise, if Lowellmina had faced the enemy with weapons and armor, they would have interpreted this as aggression and attacked without mercy.

But what about now? Lowellmina was an unarmed young woman desperately clinging to a horse. She'd fall to her death if they targeted the animal, and threatening her with blades would be the height of shamelessness. Bardloche's proud soldiers were no doubt at a loss on how to deal with her.

Glen's steady advance will cost them significant energy! I can take full advantage of my position as a "frail female" to wear them out and buy time…!

Lowellmina's assessment was correct. The majority of Glen's soldiers had no idea how to stop the princess and stood frozen. Eventually, they'd have to contend with Lowellmina's troops and, in their desire to make it a quick fight, run themselves ragged. This would obviously dull their movements, and Glen's forces would be overtaken. Lowellmina was certain of this.

Unfortunately, she'd made a single error—something visible but unseen.

"Impossible…"

Glen's warrior strength blasted away the guards as he caught up to Lowellmina in an instant.

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"Lowa! Hand me the reins!" Glen shouted as he pulled his horse up alongside

the princess's.

"What?! No, you big, dumb idiot!"

To Lowellmina, the reins were a lifeline. She'd be forced to a halt if she handed them to Glen. Actually, it was more like she *couldn't* let go. She'd fall if she so much as tried.

"You're the idiot! Watch where you're going!"

Lowellmina looked up in time to see a giant boulder approaching fast.

"Gyaaah!"

Lowellmina screamed, and Glen yanked the reins from her to turn the horse around. It dodged the rock at the last minute and obediently slowed down. Unfortunately, Lowellmina was not immune to the laws of inertia. She hardly knew what hit her before slipping from the animal's back.

"Gwah!"

Lowa let out a pitiful yelp as her bottom struck the ground painfully.

"Oww… Sheesh!"

"Are you okay?"

"My tush just died!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" Glen dismounted and stood next to Lowa. "Well, I'll ask just to be sure. Do you have any other tricks up your sleeve?"

"…No," she answered wearily.

Use my own life as a shield, race across the battlefield, and run Glen's unit into the ground.

That had been Lowellmina's plan, yet it had been foiled so easily.

"Anyway, what will *you* do, Glen? I admit not everything has gone according to plan, but I was able to make it quite far onto the battlefield. Will you carry me away on your shoulders?"

Lowellmina's nearby soldiers were fanning out. They hadn't noticed the situation yet, but if several caught sight of Glen and Lowellmina or if she called for help, they would all come running. Those pursuers who saw what happened were sure to catch up before long.

"They'll stay their bow hands if I'm carrying you. I'll cut through until I reach my comrades."

"My, that's the exact kind of answer I'd expect from a muscle head. Using a girl as your human shield? How deplorable."

"You're one to talk."

"I simply used what was already mine, so it doesn't count."

Such a schoolyard argument stood at odds with the battle around them, but

Glen and Lowellmina didn't find it odd.

"I'll give you a hand, so sit behind me. I'll tie us together with rope so you don't fall."

"So I've been reduced to luggage… Very well. I shall oblige," Lowellmina replied haughtily as she touched Glen's horse quietly. "Oh, but do travel with care. Our chase has left me feeling ill."

"I'll keep that in mind. I admit, I'm a little surprised you aren't putting up more of a fight, though."

"If I did, you'd silence me with a punch to the stomach. I'd rather avoid such unpleasantness." Lowellmina was right, of course. "Besides, I already mentioned that I've run out of options."

"Are you taking back that statement?"

"No, that's the truth. However…" Lowellmina grinned. *"I never said I didn't make a move in advance."*

Glen's spine tingled. An alarm signaled trouble in Bardloche's camp in the distance behind him.

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The conflict between Bardloche and Manfred was reaching a fever pitch. Manfred's forces launched a full-scale assault, as though laughing in the face of the expected stalemate. Not about to take this lying down, Bardloche's army issued a counterattack. Casualties mounted on both sides, and the growing likelihood of a long, difficult skirmish weighed heavily on each commander. Manfred's men in particular, an assembly of inexperienced, provincial soldiers, buckled under the unimaginable pressure.

"Prince Manfred! Our front can't hold out much longer!"

"We have requests for reinforcements on all sides!"

"We should withdraw from this melee for now and regroup!"

A stream of ghastly reports arrived in succession, and the anguished leaders offered their advice. Manfred could only grimace.

"We can't relax our grip now," Strang replied calmly from beside the prince. "The battle is in our favor. If we retreat, the enemy troops will realize we're struggling. They'll regain their morale, and our odds of victory will further diminish."

Strang was correct. Bardloche's faction far outmatched Manfred's in skill. Still, the combination of low morale and the threat posed by Lowellmina's army

behind Demetrio's in Nalthia as well as Manfred's meant the Second Prince was slowly losing ground. The commanders sensed they'd soon be overwhelmed.

"But this fight is only a prelude, Strang. We still have the one with Lowellmina afterward."

As Manfred said, they couldn't afford to expend all their strength and resources on Bardloche. The Third Prince hoped to avoid any further losses if possible.

"I understand your concern, Your Highness. However, there is nothing to fear. This battle will be over with three more steps."

These bold worlds rattled Manfred and his commanders.

"I know we've been pushing hard lately, but that's a huge claim."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?"

"I agree. We aren't poised to take Bardloche's head just yet."

Strang wasn't the least bit discouraged by their unease.

"It's no exaggeration. I speak the truth," he stated confidently. "Please see for yourselves. Everything is already in motion."

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Supreme Commander Bardloche stood alongside his men, battling Manfred's troops on the front lines.

"Don't flinch! They'll break if we knock 'em back here! Slay your foes where they stand, and don't give an inch!"

Waiting and watching in the heat of battle wasn't an option. With a mighty shout, Bardloche raised his sword and led his men across the front lines.

Damn it, don't push me like this when I'm already down…!

Bardloche knew his opponent was up to something but never imagined his brother would go all in. He wanted a breather, but there wasn't a second to spare. Manfred's army had suffered severe casualties yet appeared unfazed. The soldiers' determination to eliminate him was as tough as steel.

If Manfred keeps going like this, he'll be left at a disadvantage against Lowellmina… It's like he doesn't even care!

Over on the other front line, the conflict between Bardloche's and Lowellmina's warriors raged on. However, it was nothing like the clash with Manfred. Bardloche had poured all his resources into the latter—he had to wonder how Manfred's people felt about that.

However, Bardloche swiftly tucked these thoughts away. He needed to deal

with the immediate contest; everything else could wait.

"Your Highness! The flying unit sent to infiltrate Lowellmina's army has reached her stronghold!" his subordinate reported.

Bardloche clenched his fist. Lowellmina's capture would leave her soldiers at a loss. After that, he could focus on the fight with Manfred and recover.

We just need to hold out until the flying unit returns!

Just as he thought, the tide soon shifted.

"Your Highness! The enemy is…!" a subordinate called out.

Bardloche looked up to find several hostile squads breaking through his defenses to create gaps. He tried to command his soldiers to call for backup from the rear, but the enemy swiftly pushed in before he had the chance.

"Ngh!"

Despite Bardloche's elite force, Manfred's men were far from beaten and launched a vicious offensive. His own army's fatigue aside, there was no question this foe was impressive. This certainly posed an issue, but Bardloche hit upon a realization.

They're running out of steam!

Manfred didn't have many experienced soldiers, so the decision to mobilize them meant he was going out on a limb.

If we can deal with these guys, the rest of Manfred's army will be sitting ducks! It'll also give us a chance to catch our breath!

So what was the best way to achieve that? Bardloche's extensive battle experience led him to the answer swiftly.

"Fall back! The enemy might snap at your heels, but just ignore 'em! We'll link up with our rear units!"

If Bardloche's warriors made a stand against an assault here, there was a slight chance they'd be overrun. Their best bet was to retreat and converge with standby reinforcements before taking down the enemy, even if it left their backs exposed.

The soldiers followed Bardloche's command and promptly turned around. Those who now acted as the rear guard were slowly swallowed up, but everyone continued without faltering. In no time at all, a huge legion of allies came into view.

All right, now we can—

Before Bardloche could finish thinking, *—deal with them*, he was interrupted by an odd sight. The comrades awaiting him seemed restless.

No sooner had he wondered what was going on than one group broke off

from the rest.

"Lowellmina's army…?!"

Bardloche stood dumbfounded while the princess's finest warriors attacked.

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"…Lowellmina's faction has captured Bardloche?"

The news sent a powerful stir through Manfred's camp.

"Y-yes! Our best men cornered Prince Bardloche as he tried to flee, but one of Lowellmina's units struck from the opposite direction to create a pincer attack…"

Manfred's faction used its remaining strength to drive Bardloche against the wall but lost the Second Prince after failing to turn back the princess's militia.

"Wh-what's going on…?!"

"Now Princess Lowellmina has the advantage!"

Despite mounting losses, Manfred's faction had gone on the offensive to defeat Bardloche. Now those efforts had come to nothing, and everyone was reasonably tense.

"Worry not, everyone." Strang, the mastermind behind this plan, tried calming Manfred and his commanders. "Everything is unfolding as I planned."

Every eye fell on him.

"Strang, are you saying this is part of your strategy?" Manfred asked with evident suspicion.

"Yes, the next step will resolve everything."

Strang's confidence was more than a bold front, which was why his response felt inexplicable. How did Strang intend to stage a recovery in a single move?

While the assembled leaders contemplated this…

…Manfred realized something.

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“Guards!”

“It’s too late.”

Strang snapped his fingers, and soldiers rushed into the tent.

“Wh-what the hell are you doing?!”

One by one, Manfred and his top officials were bound. Only Strang was spared. It was obvious what that meant.

“Strang! You traitor!”

“It’s a bit too late for that, Prince Manfred.”

Strang smiled at his former master’s indignant roar.

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“Don’t be ridiculous. Him, turn traitor?!”

Glen couldn’t believe his ears as Lowellmina explained her plan.

“Oh my. I didn’t think you held Strang in such high regard,” Lowellmina teased.

Glen’s expression turned sour. “Don’t mock me. Strang might be the type to cut people out of his life when necessary, but he’s rational and possesses a strong sense of duty. Besides, sticking with Manfred is the only way to gain autonomy for his hometown.”

Glen suddenly gasped, and Lowellmina smiled.

“Yup, now you’ve got it.”

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“You’re aware that there are conservatives who support Lowellmina, correct?”

Why? Why is this happening?

Strang continued while Manfred’s mind filled with questions.

“Their actions have marred the princess’s authority, and she’s finally put her foot down. That includes how the conservatives treat the nonconformist provinces.”

Strang retrieved a letter from his breast pocket bearing Lowellmina’s signature. It was a secret missive from the princess herself.

“Th-that’s—”

“I aligned myself with you because you were the only one to consider autonomy for my home of Wespail. However, I can’t know if that was merely lip service.”

Strang had followed Manfred and put his faith in the prince for the sake of

his home. There had been no other choice. Once Strang helped install Manfred on the throne, he hoped to threaten or convince the new Emperor to honor that promise. He even expected that to be his next battle. Unfortunately, that goal had been completely subverted by Wein's bizarre scheme to draw out Demetrio.

"However, I still carry a sense of honor, and I don't want to lose to Lowa. There's also a chance her word can't be trusted either. Thus, I'd intended to remain with you until the end, but…" Strang looked down at the letter in his hand and sighed. "I never expected her to catch wind of *that*…"

"Wh-what do you mean?!" Manfred asked cluelessly.

Strang shook his head. "It no longer has anything to do with Your Highness." After turning away, he cast a final merciless barb over his shoulder. "Prince Bardloche will be handed over to Lowellmina's faction as planned, and yours will suffer enormous losses. It's over, Prince Manfred."

That icy, indifferent proclamation sat ill in Manfred's stomach.

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"So what will you do now?" Lowellmina asked Glen after she'd explained everything. "This is your chance to use me as a shield and reclaim Bardloche."

She sounded playful, but her expression was stern. Even if Lowellmina wasn't versed in the theory of combat, she knew Glen had the military strength to go to such extremes. However, he defied her expectations by sighing.

"Even if I make the trip, you'll die along the way. If that happened, Bardloche's faction would truly be done for."

"'Make the trip'…" Lowellmina shuddered with a sidelong glance.

Glen peered into the distance. "It seems that I've failed."

He couldn't even claim he'd fallen one step short. This was closer to two or three. Perhaps things would have been different if he'd honed his skills more, or perhaps they'd peaked already. Whatever the truth, it was over.

"You got me. I lost," Glen conceded, sheathing his blade. "I'll surrender, so please go easy on my warriors."

"Yesss!" Lowellmina exclaimed. "All right, there's no time to waste. Let's hop to it and start the post-battle cleanup! I'm returning to my camp, Glen! Oh, and please don't die by your own sword! You're my pawn now, after all!"

"That might be true, but don't call me that."

Watching his old friend act like her usual self felt like a weight off Glen's shoulders. He readied his horse.

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“I see. So Princess Lowellmina has emerged victorious.”

In a room inside their Nalthia mansion, word of the battle’s conclusion had reached Wein and Demetrio.

“I can’t believe *she* actually rose to the top.”

Demetrio spoke of Lowellmina with both contempt and admiration. His words reflected his position as a former political opponent and someone who understood the challenges she’d overcome.

“You mustn’t underestimate little sisters, Prince Demetrio. I, too, have been startled by my own sibling’s recent progress.”

“Is that so? Well, maybe Natra will produce a female monarch, too?”

“That would certainly be something,” Wein said with a shrug as Demetrio scoffed. “What will you do now, Prince Demetrio?”

“Since I’ve come all this way to Nalthia, I think I’ll seek an audience with our new esteemed Empress. What about you?”

“I’ll meet with the honorable Leader of Eastern Levetia as planned. Afterward, I’ll follow your example and pay Princess Lowellmina a visit.”

“Good idea. The Empire will reorganize under Lowellmina’s rule. Stand out as a benefactor while you still can, or you’ll be left in the dust.”

Even with the civil strife resolved, it would take time for the situation in the Empire to settle. If anything, Lowellmina’s rise to Empress was liable to incite fresh chaos. Despite Natra’s solid relationship with the Empire, it couldn’t let its guard down as an ally and neighbor.

That being said…

“We can celebrate just for today, right?” Wein said as he poured wine for himself and Demetrio. The two raised their glasses.

“To the birth of history’s first Empress.”

“To the future hardships of my foolish sister.”

The pair quietly toasted the girl’s outstanding achievements.

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Epilogue

Word of Lowellmina's victory rapidly spread across the continent. The once-ignored princess had soundly defeated her older brothers and taken the throne. A dumbfounded and confused populace bore witness to the very first Empress. Every world leader took the news differently. Falcasso's Prince Miroslav groaned, but Soljest's King Gruyere burst into raucous laughter.

As for the Empire's ally, Natra…

"Oh…? So the Empire now has an Empress."

"Yes. I was surprised as well."

In a room inside the royal family's detached villa, Falanya discussed this major development with bedridden King Owen.

"Wein told me he'll be away for a while because of this. Someone wishes to meet him, so he has his hands full."

"Natra and the Empire are allies. Plus, this comes as no surprise when you consider the friendship your brother shares with Princess Lowellmina. Still, you must feel lonely and upset, Falanya."

"F-Father! I'm not a child anymore!"

"Ha-ha-ha, forgive me. As a parent, you'll always be my little girl."

Owen stroked Falanya's hair apologetically as she pouted. The two were truly father and daughter. Falanya spoke softly while the king consoled her.

"I wonder why Princess Lowellmina wanted to be Empress so badly."

"What do you mean?"

"Well…it's a difficult job, isn't it? I was only Wein's stand-in, but the work was endless. I can't imagine how busy she'll be as a sovereign. Had she remained a princess, she could have lived a peaceful, easy life with no worries."

Falanya had spoken with Lowellmina in the merchant city of Mealtars and during the princess's visit to Natra. She was cheerful, beautiful, and intelligent. Falanya had difficulty accepting Lowellmina and Wein's close friendship, but

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excluding that, she thought the princess was quite charming. Such qualities alone would have guaranteed her a blissful life without ever becoming Empress.

"Hmm…" Owen briefly pondered his daughter's question. "I've never met Princess Lowellmina personally… But from what I've heard of her, I doubt she was goaded by her vassals or lured by power."

"Then why?"

"She must have a goal beyond the throne."

Falanya stiffened at this remark.

"Happiness is born from acceptance. Even if Princess Lowellmina is beloved by her citizens and enjoys all the comforts of life, a dismal shadow would have haunted her until she accepted this fate. The princess could have elected to coexist with that darkness…but she didn't. Unable to embrace the joyous future she was handed, Princess Lowellmina purposefully raced down a perilous road."

How admirable, Falanya thought. It was certainly one way to strengthen one's heart. Any such person must be noble indeed.

What did this say about Falanya? Natra's princess was a worrywart who spun around in circles. The age gap between her and Lowellmina made no difference. Even if both girls had been the same age and rank, Falanya never would have aimed to become Empress. They were two completely different people.

"…Falanya."

"Ah, yes? What is it, Father?"

"It's all right to question your path. Ask yourself what you want to do and what you are willing to accept."

Falanya mulled over her father's words. Should she support Natra as its princess or rule as its leader? Which choice could she live with?

"Pardon me." After a knock at the door, a young man with white hair and crimson eyes entered. He was Levan, King Owen's Flahm aide. "Your Majesty, it is time for your medicinal bath and physical examination."

"Already? I'm sorry we couldn't talk longer, Falanya."

"Don't worry, Father. You've given me much to consider." Falanya gave a deep bow, unwilling to interrupt his medical care. "I'll excuse myself for today. Please take care of yourself, Father."

"I will. Don't push yourself too hard, Falanya."

Once his daughter had left the room, Owen faced Levan.

"So I take it you have something to discuss with me?"

"Your Majesty is as astute as ever."

"Heh. Well, we've known each other for a long time."

Owen and Levan exchanged quiet smiles that reflected the trust they'd built over the years as master and servant. Then Levan's gaze narrowed.

"It is not pleasant news, but I must tell you all the same—it concerns us Flahm."

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Lowellmina adored the Empire. She loved it to pieces and vowed to devote every ounce of herself to its prosperity.

Yet while the Empire was a meritocracy, a girl like Lowellmina had few options. She had to be someone trustworthy. Virtuous and loving. Regal and feminine. Such traits had been continuously forced on her, and Lowellmina despised them with every fiber of her being. As she'd grown more despondent, the princess was advised to enter the military academy. Many noble girls attended, apparently. A faint hope had bloomed in Lowellmina's chest, and she had entered the school under the name Lowa Felbis.

But nothing was different there…

For female students, the academy was nothing more than an opportunity to land a future husband, and everyone was satisfied to follow the script they'd been given. Not one girl demonstrated the will to determine her future by her merit.

Bombarded by disappointment, despair, and resignation, Lowellmina had grown more distant. Then one day, she'd heard a rumor concerning a group of four brilliant but reckless students who lived by their own rules. Unwilling to accept defeat, Lowellmina had observed the quartet and had been stunned by what she saw.

These people…they're…

They did whatever they pleased by whatever method suited their fancy and depended on no one else. They set out to do something and did.

Despite her eagerness, Lowellmina hadn't been able to easily carve out her own path like these four. She'd desperately wished to be more like them.

And perhaps she could. Yes, it was possible. She'd only needed to get closer.

In that case…!

Lowellmina had gathered up a lifetime's worth of courage and walked over to the group.

"I'm curious about you all. Will you let me observe you?"

To be honest, she was still bitter about Wein's scathing reply.

“Ahh, I am going to die! This is the end! Farewell!”

Back in the present day, victorious Lowellmina’s wails echoed through the halls of the Imperial Palace.

“Why is there sooo much to do?! Even if I could split myself into a pair, they still wouldn’t be enough!”

After finally defeating her three brothers and taking the throne, Lowellmina also inherited all the responsibilities that came with the Empress position. She was ready to enjoy a new golden age, but that splendor was superficial. In reality, Lowellmina was at the end of her rope.

“Yes, that does sound rough.”

“Don’t act like you’re not involved, Strang!”

Lowellmina’s friend leisurely sipped his tea while she ran around like a headless chicken. He was quite relaxed for someone who’d betrayed his master.

“Please help me out! You can handle a few documents, can’t you?!”

“No thanks. It sounds like a pain.”

“Curse you, Four-Eyes…!”

Lowellmina glowered at him with disdain, but Strang pressed on.

“Well, it’s more than just a matter of inconvenience. I need to keep my position in mind. Now that I’ve openly betrayed Prince Manfred, I don’t want to draw unwanted attention by sticking close to you, Lowa.”

Word of the incident in Manfred’s camp would soon spread across the continent and go down in history. Strang didn’t care about others’ opinions, but it was wise to avoid inciting resentment.

“Why are you so indifferent? Thanks to the ruckus you caused, keeping a low profile will be impossible. You and Glen should just become my aides already.”

“Oh right. Come to think of it, what will Glen do?”

“He said he can’t help me until he atones for his transgressions. He’s put himself under voluntary house arrest.”

“Some things never change,” Strang said with a wry smile.

“This is no laughing matter!” Lowellmina cried. “I need all the help I can get! That includes you, Strang! You said you planned to betray Manfred all along, so please be my pawn! I promise I won’t hate you as much!”

“I see. Yes, I suppose that’s the best course of action.”

“Excellent! We have a verbal contract. In that case, you can start on this half of the paperwork mountain! I don’t want to hear any gripes. Don’t stop for even a second!”

Lowellmina pushed her files on Strang, and he raised his hands in surrender.

“Okay, okay, I’ll help you… But first, there’s something I’d like to confirm.”

“It’s about Wespail, right?” Lowellmina narrowed her eyes. “I won’t break my promise, no matter how long it takes. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure its autonomy is recognized.”

“I’m relieved to hear it. However, there’s one more thing that concerns me.” Strang’s tone turned grave. “Can you guarantee Wespail won’t be punished for the matter we discussed?”

“Yes,” Lowellmina replied. “But I can’t swear I won’t ever take advantage of it.”

“…What’s that supposed to mean, Lowellmina?”

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“Isn’t it obvious?” the soon-to-be Empress asked with a ferocious smile.

“Something wicked.”

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“Grah, my head is killin’ me…” Wein moaned as he collapsed onto a sofa. It was shortly after the War for Succession, and he was still in Nalthia.

“You’ve obviously had too much to drink,” Ninym chided him.

“It’s not my fault,” he protested weakly. “I’ve got an endless line of well-wishers.”

Indeed, high-society members from every corner of the Empire had all decided to pay Wein a visit. Needless to say, this wasn’t solely because he was the prince of an allied nation; he was also a close acquaintance of the Imperial Princess, who’d emerged victorious from the battle. Unfortunately, Wein couldn’t snub such distinguished individuals. Thus, his alcohol intake surged during these get-togethers, resulting in constant headaches.

“I appreciate the nobility’s enthusiasm…but if I’m this busy, Lowa must be losing her mind.”

“I’m sure she’s saying ‘I’m going to die’ every three seconds.”

Wein dabbled in politics as well, so he could imagine how swamped Lowellmina was feeling.

“How is the post-war cleanup coming along?”

“Everything seems to be going well so far. Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred have been taken alive, and there’s been minimal resistance. However, the two princes’ factions must be dissolved and absorbed under Lowellmina’s rule, and the preparations for her coronation are still underway. It might take time for her to assume authority.”

Only the average soldier could go home after a loss. For any leader, the end of the war was just the beginning.

“Well, that’s Lowa’s business. Let’s stick to long-distance support.”

“Yes, we have our own to-do list,” Ninym agreed.

A knock at the door prompted Wein to sit up. An official entered not a moment after.

“Your Highness, a guest has arrived.”

“Show him in.”

The man gave an obedient nod and ushered the guest inside.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the crown prince of Natra, Wein Salema

Arbalest," Wein greeted him. "Thank you for coming, Sir Ernesto."

Ernesto, the Leader of Eastern Levetia, smiled evenly.

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Once it was evident the initial introductions between Wein and Ernesto had gone well, Ninym silently took her leave to prepare to host the religious leader. This could have been accomplished without Ninym's help if they were back in Natra. Regrettably, this was the Empire. With the current Natran delegation acting as the only available staff, Ninym needed to take charge on multiple fronts.

"How is the flavor, Lady Ninym?"

"…A bit rich. Disciples of Eastern Levetia have simple palates, so less is more."

"The room furnishings are Imperial. Is that all right?"

"Yes, but use the silverware we brought from Natra."

"Captain Raklum wishes to confirm our defensive measures."

"I'll be right there. Please tell a representative of His Grace's guards they also have permission to attend the meeting."

While Ninym continued to issue orders with practiced efficiency…

"Lady Ninym, I have just returned from Natra."

Ninym stopped for a moment to receive the messenger's report. "Good work. How is the situation in Natra? Has anything changed?"

Falanya and her vassals were watching the homestead, but it was difficult to predict what might happen in these turbulent times. The people of Natra were surely concerned about Wein and the others as they meddled in the Empire's business. Therefore, a messenger periodically traveled between Natra and the delegation to secretly report on the state of affairs.

"No. The vassals, led by Princess Falanya, have come together to run the government in an efficient manner."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ninym replied, although internally, she was a mess of conflict.

Natra was doing okay without Wein; this was welcome news for any ordinary citizen, but the prince's vassals were surely worried that such a development could undercut their master. The likelihood of them using this opportunity to keep Wein settled down at home was equally alarming.

"Anything else to report?"

"No, nothing in particular. All is well," the subordinate answered.

Ninym nodded with relief. At any rate, Natra was safe. That was all that mattered. She could focus on showing Eastern Levetia the utmost hospitality.

Just as this thought crossed her mind, the messenger continued sheepishly, "…However, there *is* one more topic of concern."

Ninym frowned. "Nothing is too trivial. Speak." Foreboding built in the Flahm girl's gut. Whatever this was, she couldn't look the other way.

"This is difficult for me to say…" the messenger admitted sheepishly. "There has been some kind of reported activity among the Flahm."

"What?"

Ninym's expression instantly grew dark.

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"So Prince Bardloche has failed."

"Yes… Forgive me, Lady Caldmellia."

In the old capital of Lushan, Ibis kneeled in a room of the Agency of the Holy King within Levetia's headquarters. Caldmellia, the director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau and Ibis's master, sat before her.

"I'd assumed his obvious dealings with the West would sow more chaos across the continent once he became Emperor. What a pity."

"I provided his faction with supplies, but it was to no avail. My deepest apologies," Ibis said with a humble bow.

In truth, Caldmellia wasn't terribly upset by the results. To her, the deal with Bardloche was little more than a bonus.

"Fret not, Ibis. The matter with Prince Bardloche is unfortunate, but we are still on our way to fulfilling our primary mission. Isn't that right, Owl?"

Caldmellia turned to the one-armed man beside Ibis. His name was Owl, and like Ibis, he served the director.

"Yes. I have made contact with the Flahm in Natra and successfully disseminated the information as per your instructions."

"Marvelous," she said with a satisfied bob of her head. "It was well worth supporting Prince Bardloche and prolonging the bedlam in the East. To outwit Prince Wein, we had to keep him busy abroad."

"Does that mean everything is going according to plan, Lady Caldmellia?"

"Yes. Let us give our all, observe the situation ever so closely, and sow chaos."

Caldmellia smiled. "A drowning man will grasp at anything, even a piece of

straw. But suppose that straw had a mind of its own. Would it brush away the hand? Drown together? I'm quite looking forward to it."

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Several men gathered in secret in the Natran capital of Codebell. Each had white hair and red eyes. They were Flahm.

"Did you hear? About *you-know-what*," one said warily.

"I did. Is it true?"

The area was deserted, but everyone kept glancing around them. They knew this discussion couldn't be made public.

"I heard there's definite proof, but…"

"No one's actually seen it."

"Maybe one of the elders will know?"

The rumors circulating among Natra's Flahm seemed baseless at first, but it wasn't long before a distinct outline came into focus.

"But what if, just maybe…it's somehow true…?"

"There is no question it will be an immense opportunity and blessing for our people."

"In that case, we'll need to learn more."

Passion colored the men's voices.

"The crown prince's aide, Ninym Ralei…"

"If she really is a direct descendent of the Founder…"

"The Flahm Kingdom might rise once again…"

The hearsay born from a phantom of hope would soon transform into truth and spread like a disease among the Flahm.

◆◇◆

"…"

After hearing the messenger's report, Ninym finished her preparations to receive Ernesto and sank into contemplation.

There was worrisome activity among Natra's Flahm.

The news instantly rattled Ninym's heart, and the lack of information only heightened her unease.

Natra was a diverse nation, but history had taught the Flahm to keep to themselves. The man who'd reported to Ninym wasn't a Flahm, so he couldn't mine for more details.

Master Levan is the Flahm leader of Natra, so everything should be fine. Still…

Ninym was only human and had no idea what was happening in distant Natra. And as Wein's aide, she couldn't simply abandon her duties and rush back home.

I hope the situation doesn't go beyond political activism…

Ninym didn't think fighting for one's rights was wrong, but others would protest and grow increasingly hostile if the Flahm took things too far. She wanted to make her people understand this, but sure enough…

I'm a Flahm and our next leader…but more importantly, I'm Wein's aide.

Her priorities were Wein and Natra's well-being above all else. If the Flahm rioted, severe punishment would be necessary if there was to be any hope of preserving their people's future position. Besides, there was no point in joining the Flahm against Wein or Natra.

"Haven't you ever thought about challenging Wein?"

Ninym recalled the words of a friend.

"…"

He'd claimed the current era presented an advantage in a showdown against Wein.

I see, Ninym thought. If those troublesome friends had been in her shoes, they would have seized upon this perfect opportunity.

"The whole thing is ridiculous."

Ninym quietly laughed at herself. Unlike them, she'd never once felt a desire to fight Wein or become his enemy. She was his servant, and he was her prince. That was how things had always been and would be. It was enough for her.

"I'd better check on Wein."

Ninym returned to her duties, banishing the silly notions from her mind. All the while, she remained blissfully unaware of what was coming…

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It was a scene from a long-forgotten past. Just a silly conversation between a young boy and a girl.

"Wow, we're actually attending the academy entrance ceremony."

"Don't stand out too much, okay? After all, you're a foreign prince," the girl cautioned as she adjusted the boy's tie.

“Try as I might, there’s no hiding my irresistible aura.”
“Yes, yes, I know.”

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After slightly adjusting the tie's angle, the girl slowly stepped back for one final check. She nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes, that should do it. It's still difficult to believe we were sent abroad to study in the Empire."

"At this rate, the Empire will dominate the modern era. We've gotta keep an eye on the enemy."

"Isn't it our ally?"

"That doesn't mean we'll be friends forever. There's always the chance it might cut us off, or we might kick the crap out of it."

"You really think Natra could bully the Empire?"

When one considered the difference in strength, Natra would sooner break its leg trying.

"Anyway, the Empire's military academy is the talk of the town, so why not just enjoy the ride? I hope we meet some interesting characters."

"'Interesting characters'? Do you want to be friends with people like that?"

"Or enemies."

"…You really are too combative."

"Not at all. I'm just saying anyone out to get me is way more fascinating than those who play nice."

The girl had to wonder about that. The boy's eccentric worldview was exasperating, but she found herself indulging it and asking a question.

"So which am I?"

"…"

She posed the inquiry out of sheer curiosity, but the boy's expression suddenly grew serious. After a brief pause, he answered in an impossibly grave tone.

"Are you asking me because I secretly ate your snack yesterday?"

"Not at all, but please go on."

"Uh-oh. I really gotta stop putting my foot in my mouth."

The girl yanked the boy's collar as he tried to escape, and she chewed him out. Her question remained unanswered, but she didn't realize that until much later.

It's not like I'd ever turn against him anyway.

Still, she could not help but imagine.

What if, by some minuscule chance, they *did* become enemies? Should that come to pass, the least she could do to repay him was become an exciting adversary. The girl didn't think such a thing would ever happen.

And thus, the long-standing war between the serpents of the East concluded. However, there was still plenty in store for the era that would later be dubbed the “Great War of Kings.” This was only the turning of one page.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It's been a while. I'm Toru Toba.

Thank you very much for buying the eleventh volume of *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)*. This time, the theme was—you guessed it—"Showdown in the East"! The trouble in the Empire has been a constant fixture since the beginning, so I feel like this was a long time coming. And now it's suddenly over! Between the tangled web of power, various schemes, and clashes among old friends, everything has finally come to a head. I hope you enjoyed it!

On top of that, we've got an anime in the works! The first episode will probably air around the same time this volume is released. I hope my readers who haven't watched yet will give it a try. If you already have, I really hope you enjoyed it. Incidentally, I was initially super excited and giddy, like any viewer. However, I've grown more nervous as the air date draws near. I don't know if my heart can take much more of this! Still, I won't drop until I see the anime! I'll hang in there!

As always, I'd also like to express my sincerest gratitude.

First, to my head editor, Ohara. There will be a changing of the guard after this volume, and I honestly can't thank you enough for everything you've done. You've been with me since my debut over ten years ago, so this feels like a huge shock. Still, I'm not a greenhorn anymore. I'll do my best alongside the new editor!

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I'd also like to thank my illustrator, Falmaro. Your artwork never fails to amaze me. Lowa was the star of the show this time since this volume focused on a war in the East. The fans and I couldn't be happier with your work on her!

I'm also very grateful to all my readers. This book exists only because of the endless support you've shown me since the start of the series. I'm thrilled that we can look forward to the anime together. Please stick with me until the very end.

Emuda-sensei's manga adaptation is still going strong on the Manga UP! App! The story has reached the contents of the third novel, and it's exciting to see various characters make their debuts!

Okay, now that the war in the Empire is over, we can see the stage that lies ahead. Who will stand atop it, and who will fall? What kind of story will unfold? Honestly, I'm the author, and I'm still excited to find out. I'll work hard to deliver my best to everyone, so I hope you're looking forward to it. Let's meet again in the next volume.

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Toru Toba

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